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by John Lutz

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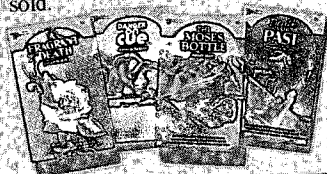
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VOLUME 27, NO. 6 JUNE, 1982

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mystery magazine

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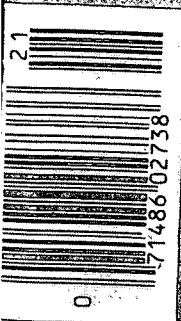
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CRIME

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Dear Readers:



In our cover story this issue—John Lutz's "Time Exposure"—we are glad to see a recounting of the further adventures of Nudger. Nudger made his first appearance in short story form, nervous stomach and all, in AHMM's February, 1978, issue ("The Man in the Morgue"), and it was revealed therein that his first name is Aloysius and that he grew up in Plain-ton, Missouri. The case concerned the kidnapping of the man who'd married Nudger's boyhood sweetheart.

Nudger's office in those days was in an old Victorian apartment building, and then as now he was driving a Volkswagen. By August, 1979, when "Where Is Harry Beal?" appeared, he had moved to a trailer and set up his office there. The case in that story involved an apparent suicide.

In "Time Exposure," Nudger is back again, out of the trailer this time but still possessed of the Volkswagen and the antacid tablets. And there's yet another Nudger adventure upcoming, "What You Don't Know Can Hurt You," in an early autumn issue.

All these stories have followed up John Lutz's novel about Nudger, *Buyer Beware* (1976). Lutz does not, however, typically use series characters. He has written more than sixty stories for AHMM, about all kinds of people, beginning with "Thieves' Honor" in December, 1966, and close to 150 stories altogether. His other novels include *The Truth of the Matter*, *Bonegrinder*, *Lazarus Man*, *Jericho Man*, and most recently *The Shadow Man*, published last year by Morrow. He is currently working on a new novel in collaboration with Bill Pronzini. Before he became a full time writer in 1975, he did a number of different things—he was a construction worker, a truck driver, an usher, and a switchboard operator for the St. Louis police force. He was born in Texas, is married, has three children, and presently lives in Webster Groves, Missouri, near St. Louis. He was nominated last year for an Edgar for his short story "Until You Are Dead" (AHMM, 1/30/80).

If it has been a long time since we last saw Nudger, it has been

even longer since AHMM contained a story by Loren D. Estleman. There was "The Tree on Execution Hill" in August, 1977, and "The Pioneer Strain" in October of that year. At that time Estleman had written one book, *The Oklahoma Punk*, a crime novel set in the 1930's. In the past five years, he has been more than busy, however, with six novels set in the West—two of them, *The High Rocks* and *Aces & Eights*, nominees for the Western Writers of America's Golden Spur; *The High Rocks* was also nominated for an American Book Award—and with additional forays into the world of crime and detection. He is a Sherlockian and has written two delightful Holmes pastiches, *Sherlock Holmes Vs. Dracula* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Holmes* (both published by Doubleday in hardcover, Penguin in paperback) and a series of novels about a hard-boiled Detroit private eye named Amos Walker: *Motor City Blue* and *Angel Eyes*, with a third forthcoming.

In between, as if that weren't enough, until 1980 Estleman almost singlehandedly put out a newspaper, the *Dexter* (Mich.) *Leader*.

And finally, we'd like to welcome back Wade Mosby. "The Long Night of Sir Dibble" is his third story for AHMM (though he has written some fifty or sixty stories all told), and his first in far too long. "Let Me Read Your Tea Leaves" was published in AHMM in April, 1962, and "Grandma's Wonderful Watch" in January, 1964. He is also a newspaperman of long standing (and a past vice-president of the Milwaukee Press Club) and spent the intervening years writing for and editing the *Milwaukee Journal Green Sheet*. He retired last year and is able now to devote himself to short story writing and golf.

Next month, a surprise: AHMM will be increased in length by 32 additional pages, going from the present 128 pages to 160 pages. It gives us more room for fiction and, later, more room for more surprises like . . . but it seems we're out of space. We'll have to finish *that* sentence the next time around.

Cathleen Jordan
Editor

There was only one way the man could have shown up in that photograph. . . .

TIME EXPOSURE



She was upset about something. All mussed by external and internal stormy weather, all wild blonde hair and wild blue eyes, haunted by the lightning. That was what had driven her to Nudger's-office. She made Nudger, who was used to dumpy divorcees and pilfered cash registers, feel like Sam Spade. Nudger liked that.

"Mr. Nudger?" she asked tentatively, brushing water from her raincoat with the back of her hand, lowering her neat frame into the chair before

Nudger's desk. The action allowed a glimpse of startlingly pale legs with slender ankles.

Nudger nodded to the ankles. A sheet of rain hit the window as if the wind had flung it there out of malice.

"I'm Adelaide Lacy," the wet blonde said. "I want to hire you."

Nudger sized her up for potential to pay, as was his habit. She was wearing a navy blue dress. Her clothes were expensive but not high fashion; she was about thirty-five, neatly groomed, and wore no wedding ring. She didn't appear to be the sort you'd go to to finance a business venture, but she looked as if she could afford Nudger's piddling fee. Nudger's alternative was another hand of solitaire.

"What's bothering you . . . Miss, is it?" She nodded. ". . . Miss Lacy?"

"These." She removed a squarish brown envelope from her purse and leaned forward to place it on the desk. "You'd better look, then I'll explain."

Nudger opened the damp envelope and withdrew an eight-by-ten black and white photograph of a downtown street. He recognized the street: Locust Avenue. The photograph was sharp; there were no people or traffic, only buildings.

Beneath the first photo was a second, a blow-up of one of the buildings; the Arcade Building, an office building Nudger had been in more than once. There was a curious thing about that photograph. All of the windows in the Arcade Building seemed to reveal empty rooms, all except one. In that window was a heavy-set, balding man seated at a desk, a pencil resting between his fingers, his head slightly bowed. He was in sharp focus; Nudger could count the buttons on his shirt. He looked familiar to Nudger, but Nudger couldn't place him.

"You want something to drink, Miss Lacy?" Nudger asked, putting down the photographs on his desk. He wanted to slow the pace of this encounter; he was experiencing intimations that made him uneasy.

"Call me Adelaide," she said, smiling nervously. "And no thanks. A photographer named Paul Dobbs came to me with those two days ago," she went on. "He said he'd been commissioned by an architectural firm to take photos of certain downtown streets. His employer was interested in the buildings, nothing else. So Dobbs would set up his camera just after sundown, when it was still light out but shadows were minimal and downtown was pretty much deserted. Then with special film he'd take

forty-five minute time exposures."

"Very long exposures," Nudger said.

"And for good reason," Adelaide told him. "As Dobbs explained it, at that slow exposure rate, occasional passing cars, buses, or pedestrians wouldn't show up in the photo; they'd be moving too fast for their images to form on the film. There could be a bank holdup on those streets and it wouldn't appear in the photograph."

Nudger understood. The same held true of any movement inside the windows of the photographed buildings. That was why all the rooms appeared empty. All but one. Nudger felt a cold weight in his stomach. He was liking this less and less. Soon his insides would be forcibly reminding him that he was ill-suited by temperament for his work.

Adelaide Lacy confirmed what he was thinking. "Dobbs told me that the only way that man could appear so sharply focused in that window would be if he was as still as the building itself. If he was dead."

Nudger's stomach kicked. He picked up a foil-wrapped roll of antacid tablets, slipped one of the thin white disks onto his tongue, and began to chew. "Dead." Gee, he disliked that word!

"What else did Dobbs say?" he asked. More rain, a sudden noisy downpour. Lightning flashed like a warning; thunder rumbled like fateful laughter.

Adelaide shifted in her chair, obviously made uncomfortable by the thought of what she was about to say. "Dobbs noticed the man in the window in one of his photographs, blew up the scene, and took it to a friend who's a reporter on the *Globe-Democrat*. The reporter told him he was crazy, that the city leased that floor of the Arcade Building, and that the man in the photo was Virgil Hiller, the city comptroller."

Face and name suddenly connected in Nudger's mind. He popped another antacid tablet into his mouth.

"The next day Hiller and his secretary had disappeared," Adelaide said, "along with half a million dollars in city funds."

"And that made Dobbs all the more suspicious of murder."

"Sure. But the assistant comptroller and even the mayor claimed they saw Hiller alive the morning *after* Dobbs's photograph was taken."

"Did Dobbs buy their story?"

Adelaide shrugged. "He had no choice. I mean, contradicting the mayor . . ."

"Right, City Hall and all that. So what did Dobbs do?"

Adelaide widened her luminous blue eyes in faint surprise. "Why, he came to me. He told me everything." She saw suddenly that she'd gotten ahead of herself, smiled a nervous, shadowy smile, and sat back. "Virgil Hiller's secretary, the woman he supposedly ran away with, is my sister Mary, Mr. Nudger. And I know what she really thought of her boss. She told me often enough he was a tyrannical creep and a secret drunk. She'd never have run away with him."

"Where is Dobbs now?" Nudger asked.

"He's disappeared."

Nudger felt a growing queasiness. He longed for a nice dull divorce case, a punch in the nose from an irate adulterer.

"Have you told the police all this?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Dobbs cautioned me not to go to the police. So did Mr. Kyle."

"Not Mr. Arnie Kyle, the gambler?"

"Yes," Adelaide said, "do you know him?"

"Only well enough to avoid him like bubonic plague."

Adelaide nodded, brushed back an errant strand of blonde hair that was still damp from the rain. "I can understand that. He came to my apartment the first time Mr. Dobbs was there and asked for the envelope."

"Is this another envelope?" Nudger asked. "What envelope are we talking about now?"

"Two weeks ago Mary came to me with this regular business-size white envelope. She was scared, though trying not to act it. She left the envelope with me and told me to open it only if something happened to her."

"And now something has, apparently. Did you open the envelope?"

"No, when I went to get it from where I kept it on a shelf in the closet, it was gone."

"Did you tell Arnie Kyle that?"

"Yes. He acted angry, though he was very gentlemanly, then he left."

"He was only acting gentlemanly," Nudger assured her. "He probably really was angry. He's the dominant force in bookmaking and prostitution in this city. He's had people killed before breakfast, then had an extra piece of toast."

"That's what Mr. Dobbs said, more or less."

Nudger grunted. "Before Mr. Dobbs disappeared." He rubbed a hand across his mouth and chin, realizing that he was starting to call everyone "mister" like Adelaide.

"Mr. Nudger," Adelaide said, "I need to know what it all means. I need to find Mary, or at least find out what happened to her. And I can pay. I have money saved, and if I have to, I'll use it all."

Nudger absently touched his twisting stomach, rapped a knuckle on the desk. "Why did you come to me in particular, Adelaide?"

"I didn't know one private investigator from another," she said candidly. "I picked you out of the yellow pages."

"That's apropos," Nudger said.

Adelaide stared at him without blinking. Her wide blue eyes seemed to mist and her lower lip quivered like a child's. Then she brought herself under control and her voice was steady but pleading. "I need help, Mr. Nudger!"

Nudger gave in. He smiled at her. "And I need money. Let's talk fee."

Ten years ago, when Nudger was a rookie patrolman in the police department, his partner in a two-man patrol car had been Jack Hammersmith. Nudger's nerves couldn't stand up under the constant strain and the hyped up life of a street cop. When his superiors realized this, he'd been assigned to play Coppy the Clown, appearing with red nose and oversized shoes at benefits and children's parties around town. Then Coppy the Clown had been discontinued by the new police commissioner as cutting too undignified a figure to represent the police department. So Nudger left the department and, after a series of short-lived occupations, discovered that, though he wasn't constitutionally fit for the work, using his police background and contacts to become a private investigator was his best hope to feed, shelter, and clothe himself.

He'd managed with difficulty to do that during the past eight years, often acutely missing Coppy the Clown. During those same years, Nudger had developed a spastic nervous stomach and iron-gut Hammersmith had risen in the department to become a lieutenant in the 3rd Precinct, and Nudger's most valuable police contact.

As usual, the rotund, sarcastic, but kind Hammersmith had put aside whatever other business he had and seen Nudger. Nudger had saved Hammersmith's life while on the police force, and almost killed him at the same time by frantically spraying bullets around a large discount store after hours while an armed robbery was in progress. That was the exploit that had earned Nudger his polka-dotted Coppy the Clown suit.

"What's with Virgil Hiller?" Nudger asked, settling into the straight-

backed wooden chair at the side of Hammersmith's desk. It was a tough chair to settle into; Nudger and anyone else who sat in it felt an irresistible urge to stand up after about ten minutes. Hammersmith was a workaholic and didn't like visitors hanging around his office distracting him.

"What I like about you, Nudge," he said, "is that you get to the point." Desk work had made the once sleek and handsome Hammersmith a portly, florid man; his image had finally caught up with the long, foul-smelling cigars he'd always smoked. "Hiller fell victim to two of man's greatest temptations: money and a woman." Hammersmith scooted back in his own comfortable leather chair. "The two seem to go together, have you noticed? Anyway, Hiller saw his chance to get his hands on both on a more or less permanent basis, tucked one under each arm, and left the city for pleasure-filled parts unknown."

"Anything in his background to suggest he'd do that?" Nudger asked.

"Nope. There doesn't have to be. We're talking about opportunity. And half a million dollars and the woman he no doubt loves, or thinks he does. Even thee and me, Nudge . . ."

"Me, maybe," Nudger said, "not thee. What about the secretary, Mary Lacy?"

"Thirty-two, straight, hard-working, and homely. But then Virgil Hiller was never offered leading roles in the movies either." Hammersmith fired up one of his abominable cigars and squinted at Nudger through its curiously greenish smoke. "You hired to find Hiller?"

"The secretary," Nudger said.

"Same thing; they're a set. You want a cigar?"

"No thanks, I love life. Did a photographer named Paul Dobbs come to see you?"

"Oh, him, sure. With his time exposure photo that showed Hiller sitting at his desk, maybe asleep."

"Or dead. How do you explain it?"

Hammersmith observed the glowing ember of his cigar closely, as if something minute had appeared there that gripped his interest. "Question is," he said, "how do you explain it to a grand jury? The date of the photograph can't be firmly substantiated, and who understands all that technical jargon? I know I don't."

"And you've got a caseload up to here," Nudger finished. He'd heard this story before from the police. He understood their point of view, too. They were undermanned and struggling to cope with a backlog of cases

they at least might solve. This was one that didn't warrant much time or effort; Hiller and Mary Lacy were probably thousands of miles away, basking on foreign sands.

"I know what you're going to ask next," Hammersmith said. "What about Dobbs's disappearance? Well, officially Dobbs hasn't disappeared, despite a phone call we got from a certain young lady named Adelaide Lacy. We checked, Nudge, and Dobbs has dropped out of sight off and on for months at a time for the last ten years. Those kinds of freelance photographers are like that. He's probably in Fiji photographing natives for *National Geographic*, or maybe doing some porno work to turn a fast buck. He's done both those things in his varied career."

Nudger's back was beginning to ache. His ten minutes in the hard chair were almost up. "How does Arnie Kyle fit in with Hiller?" he asked.

Hammersmith wiggled the cigar clamped in his mouth and raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know he did. But I'm not surprised. Kyle's the sort that likes to be seen with any politician. Makes him feel respectable, though I can't imagine why."

Nudger stood to leave, stretching his cramped back muscles. "Thanks, Jack."

"Maybe you can tell me where Kyle fits in with Hiller," Hammersmith suggested, aiming the cigar at Nudger as if it were a smoking gun.

"When I find out," Nudger said, "you'll be the next to know."

"If there is a next," Hammersmith cautioned. "You be careful of Kyle." Purely by accident, he blew a perfect smoke ring and glared at it, a bit surprised. He'd always been skeptical of coincidence.

Nudger left him like that, walked through the crowded, noisy booking area and down the concrete steps to the street.

The place to start was Mary Lacy's apartment. It was in a downtown refurbished building that Nudger figured would soon be converted into condominiums. It wasn't exclusive or wildly expensive, but it was a nice place to live, with a touch of aged luxury and plenty of atmosphere in the long, high-ceilinged halls, stained glass windows, fireplaces, and ornate wrought iron. Mary's apartment was on the fifth floor. According to Adelaide, she'd moved in two years ago and liked the place. Adelaide had a spare key and let Nudger in.

"She's paid the rent to the end of the month," Adelaide said. "I don't know what to do, start packing her things, or what."

Nudger didn't answer. He was nosing around, not knowing exactly what he was looking for, hoping he'd recognize it if he came across it.

He started with the living room, searching in table drawers, beneath lamp bases, behind drapes. He noticed immediately that Mary Lacy's apartment had been searched by experts, no doubt the police. Yet there was an uncharacteristic care with which things were put back in place; the police didn't have to be that careful, having no reason to conceal the fact that they'd searched the apartment.

For the next hour Nudger gave the apartment a thorough tossing. He found nothing that might give a clue to the whereabouts of Mary Lacy or the mysterious envelope.

Until he stopped halfway out of the bedroom, struck by what had been odd about the dresser drawers. He went back to Mary Lacy's dresser and removed its contents, then withdrew the newspaper she'd used to line the bottoms of the drawers.

"Look at this," Nudger said to Adelaide, who was standing staring at him as if reconsidering having hired him. "These sheets of newspaper are dated five years ago. You told me that Mary had only lived here two years. And this paper isn't the least bit stained; it might have been bought down at the corner newsstand yesterday."

"But why would Mary use such an old newspaper to line her dresser drawers?"

"Because she wanted to save the paper, but she didn't want anyone to know she saved it. Even if they searched the apartment, they might not think anything of old newspaper used to line drawer bottoms; they'd be too interested in the other contents of the drawers."

Adelaide was getting impatient, nervous. "But why *that* paper?"

"Look at it." Nudger held the five-year-old newspaper's front page up for Adelaide to see. It was a special edition of the *Globe-Democrat*, printed the tragic day Mayor Ollie Lane had been killed in an airplane crash while riding in the back seat of an open-cockpit skywriter as a reelection campaign attention-getter. The biplane was to have spelled out the mayor's initials high in the sky over the city. But something went wrong; the plane began fluttering downward halfway through the capital L, and exploded on contact with the ground. The pilot's mechanic had wisely disappeared. The CAA had examined the wreckage and determined that one of the wing struts was twisted from its mooring, and the turn at the base of the L had caused the top wing to buckle under the strain of the

tight maneuver. There was a large photo of the mayor on the front page, trimmed in black.

"So what does it mean?" Adelaide asked. "After all these years?"

"It could mean a number of things. Did Mary ever talk about this accident?"

"Not that I can remember."

"Did she work for the city at that time?"

"No, she was a secretary at a chemical firm. She went to work for Virgil Hiller three years ago."

Nudger began returning things to the way he'd found them, but he folded the newspaper carefully and tucked it beneath his arm.

"What now?" Adelaide asked.

"Research," Nudger told her. "I'll drop you off at your place, then phone you and tell you the results."

After half an hour at the city's main library, Nudger had a late supper and then drove across town to Paul Dobbs's apartment.

Dobbs's place was on the top floor of one of several modern three-story apartment projects that looked like elaborate motels. Their rent was cheap, and seemed like even more of a bargain because they had a pool where boy could meet girl.

Nudger stood for a moment on the third-floor front balcony, looking down at the deserted parking lot. Then he rang the doorbell. Who could say, maybe Paul Dobbs had gotten back from Fiji.

But Nudger knew better. After a few minutes, he used his honed Visa card to slip the pathetic lock and entered Dobbs's apartment. Breaking and entering this was called in courts of law. Nudger's stomach was fluttering like hummingbirds' wings.

What calmed him somewhat was that he knew he wouldn't be here long. He knew what he was searching for and he found it in less than five minutes, the place where Paul Dobbs kept his photography equipment.

It took up most of the closet in the second bedroom. The inside of the closet was a mess; there was undeveloped film unravelled all over the place, and three expensive thirty-five millimeter cameras lay on the floor with their backs open.

A sudden noise from the living room made Nudger suck in a harsh breath, fear clawing at his insides.

Someone else was in Dobbs's apartment, walking slowly toward the

main bedroom. Nudger heard the floor creak. This bedroom would be next, he was sure. He doubted if he was hearing Paul Dobbs lightfooting it around his own apartment.

Nudger eased his way out the sliding glass doors onto the rear balcony. He saw the pool glimmering darkly in the moonlight three stories below.

A deep, amused voice said from the room he'd just left, "Come out, come out, wherever you are." Sadistic and coaxing.

Nudger moved to the side of the balcony, almost running into a huge fern in a ceramic planter, pressing himself against the cool hard bricks. There was no way off the small balcony other than through the bedroom, or by a Tarzan-caliber three-story dive into the pool, and it occurred to Nudger that he didn't know which end was the deep one.

"Getting a breath of night air, are you?" the voice said, nearer, moving toward the open glass doors.

Nudger found sudden strength and lifted the ceramic planter to hurl at the man. Then he had a better idea. He yelled and tossed the heavy planter, fern and all, out over the pool. Then he drew back into the shadows at the very end of the balcony.

A large man wearing a gray suit cursed and ran to the railing, gazed down for a second at the foam and ripples in the dark pool. Then he wheeled and ran back into Dobbs's apartment. Nudger saw that he was carrying a gun.

Nudger waited five seconds before he followed the man's path through the empty apartment. He could hear descending footfalls clattering on the back stairs. Nudger ran as silently as he could down the front stairs. Then he was out the front entrance and racing across the parking lot to his car.

"Hey!" a voice yelled behind him. Nudger didn't know whose voice, didn't pause or look back to find out. He had his key in his hand when he yanked open the car door, had it in the ignition switch even before he was in the seat. The engine came to life on the second try and he sped from the blacktop lot, the right front fender ticking one of the brick pillars flanking the driveway.

He took every side street at top speed in the old Volkswagen, skidding around each corner, checking the rear view mirror on the straightaways.

Ten minutes had passed before he could assure himself that he wasn't being followed. And it was a wonder he hadn't picked up a cop, speeding around like a teenage leadfoot. Where were the traffic cops when you

needed them? Out chasing crooks? He'd talk to Hammersmith about this.

But if he was right about Dobbs, he'd have more important things to discuss with Hammersmith. He came to a major intersection and got his bearings, then popped three antacid tablets into his mouth and drove toward Adelaide Lacy's apartment.

Adelaide was in bed. It took her about five minutes to come to the door and let Nudger in. She was wearing no makeup and had her hair wrapped in some kind of scarf to preserve her hairdo. Her drab flannel robe was tied crookedly about her waist with a sash, and brown furry slippers destroyed the grace of her ankles.

"Mr. Nudger? . . . What . . . ?"

Nudger looked her over. For the first time he didn't mind that she'd called him mister.

"I've just come from Paul Dobbs's apartment," he told her.

"Did you find anything?" She walked halfway across the living room and turned to look at him. "Do you want some coffee?"

"I found confirmation of a sort. Yes, thanks, cream and sugar."

"I drink mine black," said a voice from the doorway.

Nudger turned and saw a small dapper man wearing a checked sport-coat, with a luminous striped silk tie that appeared almost-metallic. He recognized Arnie Kyle. And he recognized the large man with Arnie Kyle; he'd seen him earlier at Paul Dobbs's apartment.

"That was good," the big man said admiringly to Nudger. "I really thought you'd jumped off that balcony into the swimming pool."

"Actually," Nudger said, his stomach beginning to pulsate, "I don't even swim, especially with my clothes on."

Arnie Kyle smiled: "That might be good to know." He looked at Adelaide, then back at Nudger. "Forget the coffee. Both of you can sit down."

The large man was holding a revolver with the casual respect of an expert marksman.

Nudger sat on the sofa, and Adelaide sat down next to him. She absently rested a hand on his wrist. He hoped she wouldn't pick up his trembling and become unsettled.

"You're a lot smarter than you look," Kyle said to Nudger. "But as soon as Riley here told me what you were looking for in Dobbs's place, I came to the same conclusion you did. That's why I showed up here, apparently just in time."

"What's he talking about, Mr. Nudger?" Adelaide asked.

"Five years ago," Nudger said, "Arnie Kyle was in on the scheme to murder the incumbent mayor so the election would go to his man. The city comptroller, Virgil Hiller, was the only member of the previous administration in on the murder, which explains why the library reveals he was the only member who kept his job all these years. But Hiller was becoming a risk, drinking too much, talking too much. He talked to his secretary, your sister Mary. Naturally she was afraid to go to the authorities in an administration corrupt from the mayor on down. To protect herself she sealed something incriminating in an envelope and left it with you. Dobbs figured she might have done something like that for insurance, so he searched your apartment without your knowing, found the envelope, then came to you and pretended to be there for the first time."

"But why come see me if he already had the envelope?"

"To put it back," Nudger said. "Dobbs was a small-time photographer who'd stumbled onto something big. He knew that if that envelope turned up missing, he'd be suspected of having stolen it, and that would put him in danger. So he took it, photographed its contents, and then put it back—not on the first visit with you, because Arnie Kyle interrupted him. But I remembered your mentioning a second Dobbs visit. Since the envelope hasn't been found in his apartment, or anywhere else, I think he managed to slip it back onto your closet shelf during the second visit. You were supposed to find it later and assume you simply missed it the first time you looked."

"Dobbs was like you," Kyle pointed out, "just smart enough to get himself in serious trouble by playing out of his league."

Nudger tried to ignore that unnerving comparison and continued. "When Arnie Kyle found photographs of the contents but no envelope in Dobbs's possession, he knew the original was still missing and started frantically searching for it. It never occurred to him that Dobbs would want to photograph its contents and then bring the envelope back here where he got it."

"Until tonight," Kyle said. "When it occurred to you."

"I had the advantage," Nudger said sportingly. "I knew about Dobbs's second visit with Adelaide. It wasn't difficult to figure out the purpose of that visit."

"Everybody seems to have some kind of angle in this world," Kyle said. "Ain't it depressing? It causes this kind of trouble. The question now is, what are we gonna do about it?"

Nudger shrugged. He knew there was no question in Kyle's mind, except possibly how to dispose of the bodies. "I have no idea. That's why I stopped on the way here and phoned Police Lieutenant Hammersmith, to ask him to meet me here so we can figure this thing out."

"Don't waste my time with bluffing," Kyle said. He had a shark's underslung smile. "It doesn't become you to lie. You never talked to Hammersmith, admit it."

"I admit it," Nudger said, as sirens began to wail in the distance. "But I left a message on his recorder."

Doubt crossed Kyle's intense features like a subtle change of light.

"You haven't personally killed anyone," Nudger told him. "But being in the vicinity here while Riley does would amount to the same thing."

"He really is bluffing," Riley said. He had more nerve than Kyle and he seemed eager to kill whereas Kyle was merely willing. Nudger wondered if Riley was the one who had made Mary Lacy reveal the whereabouts of the envelope. Who had killed Mary Lacy and Virgil Hiller.

The sirens were getting louder, getting closer.

"If you wait around to find out for sure if I'm bluffing," Nudger said, "it will be too late for you to slip out of the building."

"Those might be fire engine sirens, Arnie," Riley said.

Kyle shook his head.

"They ain't fire engines."

Nudger's stomach did flip after flip as Kyle stared appraisingly at him. Riley was standing very straight and tall, breathing rapidly.

Then Kyle gave a sort of snarl and took a few steps toward Adelaide's bedroom.

"Knowing where that envelope is might hang you in court," Nudger pointed out. "Not to mention what might happen if it were found in your possession."

Kyle stopped and glared at him. The sirens were quite close now. He sighed. "You really ain't as dumb as you look," he said.

"No," Nudger agreed, "I ain't."

With a snake-like hiss, Kyle spat on the carpet. "Come on," he said to Riley. "Let's get out by the fire stairs." He beat Riley out the door.

Riley tucked his gun into a shoulder holster and smiled faintly at Nudger as he followed, as if he derived some satisfaction at least out of seeing his boss outsmarted.

Adelaide let out a long breath and removed her hand from Nudger's

wrist. She stared at him. "Were you bluffing?"

Nudger stood and began to pace to help get rid of his heartburn. He reached into a shirt pocket, peeled back the silver paper on a roll of antacid tablets, popped three of them into his mouth, and chewed.

"I wasn't bluffing," he said, as the sirens growled to silence in the street below. Car doors slammed. Within a minute footsteps sounded on the stairs and in the hall.

When Hammersmith arrived, they found the envelope shoved to the back of the top shelf of Adelaide's closet. Inside was a blueprint of the downtown convention center that had been constructed five years ago at the time of the mayor's death. There was an X in red ink on the blueprint and a footnote, indicating where the body of Fred Carter, the missing mechanic paid by Arnie Kyle to sabotage the mayor's plane, was encased in the building's concrete piling.

Hammersmith stared at the blueprint and shook his head sadly. "It's gonna take this city years to get over what's coming."

"The dead legitimate mayor, the skywriter pilot, Paul Dobbs, Mary Lacy . . . they were all victims, too," Nudger said. "They'll never get over anything again."

Hammersmith admitted Nudger had a point. After ordering a pickup bulletin for Arnie Kyle and Riley, he stormed out of Adelaide's apartment, leaving behind a greenish haze of cigar smoke.

When they were alone, Adelaide said, "It didn't turn out at all the way I wanted when I hired you, Mr. Nudger."

"Things seldom do," Nudger told her, "but sometimes they turn out better than they might have. I guess that has to be good enough."

Adelaide smiled a tight, resigned smile and nodded, her eyes moist.

Nudger took her out and bought her several double scotches. He drank warm milk.



The secret to a good con, Tony Smooth said, is lateral thinking. A house full of priceless treasures, for instance—there was more than one way to deal with a temptation like that.

THE BOTTLE FROM THE CORK



by **JEFFRY SCOTT**

Not for nothing is his name Tony Smooth. We met long ago, during my do-gooding phase, when I did a lot of prison-visiting.

After we've shaken hands, I have a nagging urge to count my fingers. Encounters with Smooth are like class reunions on a dormant volcano—all the pleasure of renewed friendship, with worrying undertones.

This time Smooth pounced on my Rubik cube before he sat down. He regarded me like a fox. He looks rather like one: bushy russet hair, a long

nose, a lipless mouth set in a small, knowing grin. "Bet you a fiver I crack this inside three minutes. Tell you what, I'm a fool to myself, make it two minutes dead."

Now there's something about the way a person handles that infuriating toy that betrays whether they're greenhorns or seasoned veterans. And Tony Smooth had been inside for two and a half years. "Done," I smirked.

Whereupon he produced a wicked little screwdriver, turned the cube into a heap of tumbled dice on the desk blotter, and reassembled it so that each face was a solid color. Elapsed time, twenty-eight seconds.

"That's cheating, Smooth!"

"No, that's five quid you owe me." He wagged a finger. "I've told you and told you, only greedy men get conned. You thought I had no chance."

And, tucking the money into a waistcoat pocket: "Not that it was a con. I just did what you never expected. Lateral thinking, they call it, attack the problem from a surprise angle. It's my strong point."

"The criminal mind, they also call it."

Smooth ignored that. "It's like opening champagne without spilling a couple of glasses' worth over your shoes. The trick is, don't take the cork from the bottle, ease the bottle off the cork."

He held up a hand, traffic-cop fashion. "Just for a second there, you were going to say they're the same thing. Not at all. But that's why you make a fair whack of money, very slowly and working hard, while I'm generally rolling in the stuff and have such an interesting life."

While I was still sputtering, Tony Smooth backed his argument with the story of the Great Turnbuckle Capers.

Smooth holds that he'd be out of business—if you can call it that—were it not that so many hard-headed people take the most absurd risks with their property, for the sake of saving paltry sums of money. Dick and Avis Turnbuckle, whom he met in the Dorset village of Great Abbey, gave him fresh proof of that.

Armed with funds to stay comfortably submerged for at least six months, Smooth chose Great Abbey as the very place nobody would come looking for him until things cooled off in London. It had a ruined church, a hotel called the King and Crown, and that was all. Think of an island of tedium entirely surrounded by farmland.

Master of the indirect lie, he soon had everyone believing that he'd been something in the rag trade and was thinking of settling in the country.

on the proceeds of selling his firm.

The Turnbuckles, with more time than notions for filling it, had a habit of taking pre-dinner cocktails at the King and Crown. Sometimes they said to hell with dinner, though not very clearly. The couple didn't take much cultivating. Smooth did it because Avis was attractive, but mainly to stay in practice.

Apart from a jarring physical likeness to the Soviet leader, Mr. Brezhnev, there was nothing special about Dick Turnbuckle. He'd made his pile as an architect and retired early. He was good at standing drinks, startlingly stingy in other directions. Tony Smooth, apparently blind to the quirk, filed it away from habit, in the card-index behind his hungrily merry green eyes.

Avis, ten years younger than her husband, always touched the hand of a man lighting her cigarette. Her generous bosom was generously displayed. Smooth could never be sure whether she was sending him signals or merely, like himself, keeping in training. He made no great effort to settle the doubt.

The three of them became firm, boozy friends. Inevitably, Smooth was invited to dinner at Cliff House. He had to borrow the hotel manager's car, for the Turnbuckles lived at the seaward end of a three-mile-long lane.

Their home took him aback. Not by its size, for it was evident that the couple weren't down to their last twenty thousand. What impressed him was their good taste and quiet, successful determination to pamper it.

He wouldn't have killed for their pictures; Smooth is the breed of criminal who not only abhors violence but regards it as a particularly shameful admission of failure and addled wits. But he would have looked stern and spoken extremely roughly.

Then there was the Georgian silver, its watery patina mellow as moonlight, and the porcelain, and cabinet after cabinet of jade and ivory.

Mistaking his avaricious daze for finer feelings—and admiration for themselves—the Turnbuckles became even less wary. "It'd worry me, having all this stuff in a place so far off the beaten track," he remarked invitingly.

That was when they showed him how the burglar alarms were laid out. "They're on a direct-line silent system to Great Abbey police station," said Dick. "No gongs and hooters and so forth, just a nice quick arrest, nicked in the act, eh?"

Avis spoke with a touch of spite. "I insisted on it. Dick won't let me have live-in help and I'd not sleep a wink, on my own here when he's away at night."

Her husband shrugged goodnaturedly. "Honestly, Tony! Just the two of us, and we eat out half the time. Avis has every labor-saving gadget invented, what in the world do we need with servants eating their heads off at our expense . . ."

"Quite right," Tony Smooth agreed, fervent yet abstracted. He was daydreaming of being alone here, frantically ferrying property out to a waiting truck.

Smooth suspended his narrative. "What's the matter, indigestion?"

"Indignation. You're about to gloat over a gross abuse of those people's hospitality," I said sternly.

He shook his head. "There you go again, yanking at the cork, getting champagne all over your boots."

"Sorry, I misjudged you. So there wasn't a burglary."

Tony Smooth gave me a pitying look. "Of course there was, you mean. I'm telling you, that place was Villains' Heaven. Made to be turned over. Just shut up and listen."

Over another meal at Cliff House a few weeks later, Smooth gained more evidence of Dick Turnbuckle's affectionate grip on money. He and his wife were preparing to spend three weeks at their villa on Majorca; Avis reminded Dick to contact the house-sitters' agency, and he turned mulish.

Smooth had heard, disapprovingly, of the American trend towards hiring respectable folk to live in one's home for extra security during vacations or long business trips. He hadn't realized that the system had reached England, too.

Dick grumbled, "I didn't spend a mint on burglar alarms and so forth just to waste even more on giving people a paid holiday in my own house, luv. Take that married couple we had last year—they loved it, they'd have been happy to look after the place in return for their keep. But the agency charges a wicked fee."

"Rubbish, darling, we can afford it. And don't tell me we're insured. Half the stuff here couldn't be replaced. Anyway, we're not going on holiday unless you hire house-sitters, so that's that."

Innocently—innocently!—Tony Smooth said, “You’re right, all the same, Dick. Why, *I’d* be your house-sitter, jump at the chance . . . save the cost of staying at the King and Crown, for a start.”

His tone was pitched exactly right, with a touch of whimsy allowing the Turnbuckles to reject him without embarrassment, by pretending to assume he was joking. Not that it happened. Looking even more like Brezhnev—Smooth expected to be invaded over the coffee—Dick boomed, “Hey, would you, old chap?”

Noting Avis’s set expression, Smooth shook his head. “Not off the top of my head, Dick—nor yours. I wouldn’t let a virtual stranger have the run of my little flat at Wimbledon, and it isn’t a patch on this place. You hardly know me, you’d need references.”

Avis nodded with unconscious vigor and Turnbuckle had a rueful spark in his eye, miffed by his own incaution. Smooth could read them well enough; Dick, for instance, was thinking that a real black sheep wouldn’t have brought up the matter of references. His wife, way ahead of him, was considering the possibility of a double bluff.

“Not that it would be a problem,” he said easily. “I went after a post with Harrods after I sold the shops, this year. In the end they weren’t offering enough money, and you know how it is once you’ve been your own boss . . . it takes a lot of gelt to lure you back to the galley slave’s bench! But I’ve still got the references they asked for.”

They were excellent documents, written with intimate knowledge since Smooth had forged them himself. Ten days later the Turnbuckles were aboard a jet to the sun and Tony Smooth was temporary master of Cliff House.

After a few days, Smooth obtained large-scale Ordnance Survey maps of Great Abbey and neighborhood. What he worked out made him frown and shake his head with an air of finality:

He maintains that he has spent less time behind prison walls than most professional criminals, and used it to better purpose. Once inside he listens hard and stays out of trouble.

Combing his memory, he retrieved a telling anecdote and matched it to the teller, a large, toadlike person called McT., a receiver of stolen goods who lived—when at liberty—near the beautiful city of Bath. Tony Smooth, who had permission to use the Turnbuckles’ second car, went there the same day.

McT., when Smooth located his nasty little bungalow some hours later, was pleased to see him. But then Smooth was carrying a very large bottle of scotch and McT. was near enough an alcoholic for experts to work hard on detecting the difference.

Like any professionals, they talked shop. "What about that bloke, country-house burglar, who couldn't bear to part with half the stuff he nicked?" Smooth asked, sliding the remark in among a lot of aimless conversation. "What happened to him?"

"Nothing much, he's still around. Hasn't been collared, if that's what you mean. He's picky, is young Dennis Dudden, does no more than two or three jobs a year."

"Doesn't he have a gimmick?" Smooth enquired artlessly.

McT. emitted a lecherous snigger. "That's one name for it! Birds come to Dennis like bees to honey. He's always got one ready for work."

"Pimp as well, is he?"

The fence shook his head. "Nah! Ackcherly, young Dennis is one of your genuine connoisseurs who happens to be bent. I handle a lot of his stuff, and he never brings away rubbish. But he always keeps the best. Same with his women, he catches them young and trains 'em up—speak nice, dress classy.

"They do his scouting, see. He turns them loose at the posh race meetings, four-star hotels. When they've hooked a likely punter, found out how much he's worth and where he keeps it, Dennis does the rest. Once, this married bloke, Dennis steamed in while the punter's wife was on holiday."

McT., finding the glass irksome, had switched to swigging from the bottle. He laughed messily. "Get the picture? Dennis knocks at the door, says: 'Right, mister, the van's outside and I'm going to load it with the best. Any trouble, my young lady tells your missus how you've been spending those late nights at the office.'

"But that was a one-off. Generally, see, the bird pumps the bloke, gets a good idea of the house and contents, and passes the info to Dennis."

Smooth chortled admiringly. "Nice work. I wouldn't mind meeting this Dennis Dudden, he sounds good for a laugh and a shout. Where does he hang out, these days?"

McT. put the bottle down. "Look, you must think I'm just off the boat, Tone. I'm about as drunk as you are, Sunbeam, which isn't much. Nothing for nothing in this world."

Resignedly, Smooth passed over five ten-pound notes. Then he gave McT. another sheaf of brown paper, only half the width of the previous batch.

The fence was fairly drunk, after all. "What's this stuff?"

"Five more tenners, cut in half. What you tell me doesn't go back to Dudden. End of the week, the missing halves come to you in the mail. Fair enough?"

McT. nodded and grinned. "Your old trustful self, Tone. Right, you won't run into Dennis, he keeps himself to himself. D'you know Clifton, Bristol, by the old suspension bridge? That's where he lives, 28 Brightona Mews."

"The address is no good to me," Smooth complained, branding it into his mind. McT. shrugged and went on, "You get to him through his latest woman. There's a very spraucy wine bar and restaurant in Bristol, Victorian-style place on Park Street. Venus's Shell, it's called. Look for the most cracking bird in the place, and that'll be Sheena."

Tony Smooth decided that Dennis Dudden had a head on his shoulders. The burglar's house, though well kept up, wasn't flashy—a small place rather more than a century old, two stories of firmly-curtained windows. Brighton Mews was respectable, upwardly-mobile. More informative windows had glimpses of carefully modernized rooms, stripped pine closets, wine racks.

But No. 28 was special in its way, as the only detached house in a terraced canyon. And although "Mews" suggested a cul-de-sac, Smooth found that an old bridle path wound down the hillside, through parkland, behind Dudden's place. The path, hard-packed earth, passed a solid timber door, with no exterior handle, in the high brick wall of Dudden's back garden. One could drive a Land Rover up here from the lower road after dark, Smooth theorized, and nobody the wiser. This was where the goodies arrived.

When he went to Venus's Shell, his respect for Dudden rose another notch. He had no trouble in selecting the most dazzling woman there. Sheena was a pale, slender brunette with a vast cloud of hair making her oval face seem even more delicate. And without being in the least tarty, she was one of those rare women who seem destined to look best undressed.

Smooth took things in key with his name. The first night, he picked

up a junior executive at the Grand Hotel and took her to dinner at the Shell. His shirt was cotton, his shoes real leather, his suit had cost £350, and since that had been more for tailoring than vulgar display, at first glance it might have been cheaper except for the cut. On his second visit, he sat at the bar, ordered an expensive German wine, drank exactly one and a half glasses in almost an hour, and left for Dorset.

Third time lucky. Venus's Shell, unusually, was semi-deserted at nine P.M. Sheena was making small-talk with the barman and another girl. An argument began, amiable enough, over the date of man's first landing on the moon. Sheena gave Smooth a glance of appeal, and he settled the thing in her favor, rapping out day, month, and year with calm authority.

She raised her glass. "Thank you! Nobody around here believes I've got a brain in my head. You must be something to do with space, or aircraft, yes?"

Tony Smooth recognized a pleasurable vacuum, instantly dispelled, in his lungs. He blinked. "Um, sort of. Once upon a time. Creative idleness is my line now. Do stop drinking that awful stuff and help me with my bottle."

"Why not, I ask myself? And answer came there none." Sheena moved up three stools. "You've been here before . . . Wednesday, wasn't it, with a pretty girl, County type of gel, the athletic sort?"

Listening to the accent, and the on-sight social labelling of his previous escort—slightly off target, though shrewd enough—told Smooth that Sheena wasn't a product of Dudden's polish lessons. She was younger than he'd assumed at a distance, and nothing about her was recently acquired. Rich runaway, he guessed, or at least, runaway from comfortably-off circumstances. In it for kicks, short-term security, and the luxury she'd been bred to take as a minimum? Probably not, for along with the allure—the faintest jarring note—was an indefinably feral aura. A greedy lass, Smooth told himself, happily; a mercenary.

He fancied her like mad. Even knowing that that was the object of the exercise couldn't daunt him. "Pretty girl? I don't know, the minute you spoke to me, I had this incredible fit of amnesia about every other woman I've ever known." He could go on like that all night.

"Dear me," Sheena said mildly, "I hope you're not counting on me for therapy." So could she.

Among many other things, he came to admire Sheena's way of going

about her work. She'd have been suspicious if he hadn't asked obvious questions, so he did.

And she fielded them, sweetly yet implacably, by saying, "Out of bounds" or "Why do you need to know?"

Again, he reacted as she might expect. "Oh, certainly. But *I've* got no secrets." This was on their second date. He told her all about himself, rarely telling a full lie when it could not be woven with truth. Thus, he said he had borrowed a house in Dorset, after several years in business overseas, and might well buy it.

"I've got to, really," he confided, in the way some men disguise a boast. "I need so much room—being a jade freak. In fact, my collection looks so good in this place, it's ninety percent sure I *will* buy it."

Sheena's soft brown eyes kindled, but that might have been due to his hand, under the restaurant table. "Jade? Daddy's mad on it, too. What's your special line?"

Smooth gathered, on their next date, that Dennis Dudden had taken the bait and was forcing the pace. Smooth, meeting her at the Dragona, where he was overnighing, suggested the theater. Sheena gave him a level look.

"If you can't think of anything better. But not my place. There's a man in the background, as you must have worked out for yourself by now. And if I start bringing my discoveries home, he'll be in the foreground, with a vengeance."

Steering her to the elevator—he'd booked a double room, in case—Smooth murmured, "I don't find you in the least sexy . . . it's just that I can't resist a girl who's good at puns."

The following weekend Sheena spent at Cliff House. Listening to her in the kitchen—"Stay there, you've won breakfast in bed," she'd told him—Smooth applauded her manifest skills. His keys were where he'd tossed them the previous night, but exactly.

And they were only the faintest trace greasy, from where she had made the impressions.

While he was driving her back to Bristol on the Sunday afternoon, Sheena spoke suddenly. "Would you say I was sentimental?"

"Not in the least." When conning anyone, Smooth explains, tell the absolute minimum of untruths, even at cost to their vanity.

"Well, I am. Sometimes. About some people." The road was straight,

she rested her head on his shoulder. Her hair had a wonderful perfume, a factor of which she was not ignorant. "Like you, even if you are a smug old bastard and a closet MCP."

Marvellous, Smooth reflected without malice; she managed to sound genuinely affectionate. Loving, even.

"Tuesday is our first anniversary, we met two weeks ago. Try to be in Bristol, the same hotel, seduce me all over again."

Thank the Lord, thought Tony Smooth, for the Turnbuckles were due back at the end of the week and he'd been wracking his brains to move things along.

Repressing the comment that, technically, he had been the seducee, as it were, Smooth arranged to meet her at seven thirty P.M., two days hence. "You might just as well have stayed down in the country with me," he scolded fondly.

"Oh, I'd love to have done that, darling. But I've got to be back in Bristol this week."

Of course she had, he agreed, mentally. How else could Dennis Dudden, country-house burglar of discriminating tastes, be sure that his latest target was empty, except by drawing its tenant to a city some hundred miles away?

On Monday, Smooth spent a lot of time outdoors. The Turnbuckles had a gardener calling three times a week, but Smooth contrived to look busy and absorbed. After lunch, pale autumn sunlight struck pale sparks a quarter-mile away, where the lip of the cliff overlooked the house. Apparently intent on his gardening, Smooth smiled and shook his head.

Despite Sheena's no doubt detailed report, Dudden was doing his own final checks. Maybe he didn't know about binoculars with non-reflective glass. . . . As if remembering an appointment, Smooth dropped his fork, tossed down the gardening gloves, and hurried indoors.

A moment later he reappeared in the porch, locking the front door and then turning another key in an unobtrusive metal box set in the wall beside the jamb. He trotted along the front of Cliff House to its garages and drove off to Great Abbey. He'd felt that Dennis Dudden's vigil ought to be rewarded.

On his way to the appointment with Sheena, Smooth wondered what fail-safe system they had. If he'd been Dudden, he would have phoned his partner just before going in. Then, if the punter had failed to arrive

and might still be at home, the raid could be aborted.

Sure enough, less than a quarter hour after meeting her in the bar and taking her up to his room, the phone rang, beside the bed. Sheena picked it up, frowned, snapped, "Certainly not," and crashed it back on the cradle. "Some idiot demanding room service," she said.

Her eyes narrowed. "What's so funny?"

Smooth's grin widened. "I was thinking what sort of room service you're giving me," he explained, untruthfully. The fact was, he wished he could be at Cliff House for the next hour or so. He had a childish relish in practical jokes.

The van, neither new nor old, with its alloy ladders clamped to the roof, looked the sort of thing a TV repairman might use. Dennis Dudden drove straight to Cliff House and parked facing the lane.

Getting out, he stood in the darkness until his sight adjusted. He could hear the sea, distantly, and the sigh of wind in the telephone wires. Lights showed in some of the house's windows, but knowing that they were controlled by a time-switch, he wasn't concerned.

Reassured, Dudden wiped his damp palms, inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, and walked up to the front door.

Having switched off the alarm, he tried another key in the front door. Sheena's hand had been steady, her technique unflurried. It grated a little, but the tumblers yielded. Methodically, he used another key on the second lock. Even without inside information, he would have had high hopes of this place. Anything protected with such care had to hold worthwhile plunder.

Although Sheena had warned him, he cursed under his breath at finding himself in a lobby, confronted by yet another locked door. This one was heavy glass with a ripple pattern, and the key was stubborn, the lock reluctant. He spent some ninety seconds fiddling, then squirted oil into the lock and tried again. In the end, he had to cut the glass, leaving an arc still fixed while the rest swung free.

He checked his watch. Still plenty of time—on principle, however generous the margin, Dudden reckoned to quit any burglary site within twenty minutes.

As had happened with Tony Smooth, the cabinets and paintings made him tingle with greed and excitement. Unlike Smooth, he wasn't content to lust at them from a distance.

Appreciating good carpentry, he didn't smash the fragile things but slipped their mainly decorative locks with a special tool. His bag held a large supply of those padded envelopes in which fragile items can be sent through the mail. Stolidly, willing himself not to gloat until later, Dudden began dropping jade artifacts into envelopes, envelopes back into the bag. He was also working out how best to carry the paintings—slit out of the frames, and rolled, or simply as they were. He had a pile of dropsheets in the van; it might be worth investing an extra minute in going and fetching them, to stop the frames' gilding getting scratched.

Sergeant Byron, from Great Abbey, had a sense of the dramatic—and a sense of humor. He watched Dudden toiling by the beam of a pencil torch resting on a chair; and then switched the lights on from his place by the door.

"It's nearly two months to December 25th," said the policeman, "and Father Christmas is supposed to *leave* presents, not take them away in his sack. So you can't be him. And you're nicked, my friend."

Dennis Dudden, who'd almost had a heart attack, wiped his face and quivered. "Oh, —!" exclaimed the luckless lover of fine things.

Sheena was drowsing when Smooth raised himself on an elbow and phoned Cliff House. "Can I help you?" came a constabulary voice in answer.

"You have," Smooth assured the man, and hung up. Immediately he dialled another number.

"McT.? No names, you'll know my voice, right? Remember that chap and the stuff he wouldn't sell you? Well, there's been a change of ownership. Want to make a deal?"

"Always," said McT. "Gimmie time to take a cold shower and put a new head on. You're not thinking of bringing it to where I live? Sorry, but some fools do try that."

"Do me favors." Smooth was affronted. "Last year, when I came down from the Smoke and met you and we had a drive round—we stopped at a motorway service area between Bristol and London. Remember which one?"

"I'd better." The fence sounded more alert by the split-second.

"Great. There, in an hour. I'll have a rental truck, you strike a price and pay cash, drive it away, take the motor back in the morning." Smooth hung up again.

Sheena, spectacularly naked, frightened by Smooth's new, common voice, was poised on the edge of the bed by then. "What in the hell is going on?"

Smooth told her as he dressed. "Your feller has just come unstuck. He's either helping the police with their enquiries, as the saying goes, or on the run. I don't know about you, Flower, but I'm for 28 Brighton Mews. Give me the keys, tip me to the alarms if any, don't be a silly girl, and you're on for a corner of what I get."

"You're a bloody crook!" But Sheena had her tights on and was fastening her bra.

Smooth beamed at her. "The only thing our romantic little affair lacked, sweetheart—the heartening knowledge that I'm a twin soul."

"Never, ever, do a house at the end of a single-lane highway," Tony Smooth lectured me. "You can have all the time in the world and still get into some very naughty predicaments. Courting couple's car breaks down in the lane, Farmer George turns his herd of cows out there because nobody ever uses it after sundown on a Friday, all that class of mischief."

"Also, though I was using a working name in Great Abbey, George and Avis and the hotel people and even the local cops knew my face well. I just *couldn't* turn that drum over. And it was begging for it. I tell you, I fretted for days on end, lost weight even."

"Until I gave myself a right talking-to, a scolding. I wasn't using the old lateral thinking. Don't take the cork from the bottle . . ."

"I know, I know, take the bottle from the cork."

"Now you're talking," said Smooth. "When McT. and me were in the slammer, years before, I'd tucked away his tale of Dudden, thinking that one day Dudden's drum would make a succulent tickle. Best people to rob are robbers, they can't make a fuss about it."

"Except with a shotgun," I suggested. I like Tony Smooth, but I wish he wouldn't live so dangerously.

He shrugged and pulled a face. "Dudden went down for five years, he won't be out for another six months yet. And he doesn't know who turned him over. McT. won't split, he can't. As for Sheena, when she saw how much McT. tipped up for the truck—I took everything in Dudden's house, and he'd been a thief for a long time—she got very affectionate. Even after getting her whack."

"So after I'd done what I had to at Great Abbey, we went abroad for

a while. She's married to a French tycoon we met at Cannes. Most respectable lady; never heard of Dudden or Bristol, or me, natch."

I asked why he'd gone back to Great Abbey.

"Use your loaf! I was listed at the village nick as temporary keyholder. What would they have thought if I'd gone walkabout as soon as the Turnbuckles got burgled?" Smooth sighed tolerantly.

"As it was, I had to put myself about a bit that night. Dudden must have been nabbed about half past eight, 'cause that was when I rang and got the law. Dudden would have just let it ring.

"So we were off to the races. Took the truck to his place, loaded it with the cream of his collection, except it was all cream, that boy was a picker. The neighbors were used to seeing Sheena going in and out with him, so if anyone noticed us, they weren't suspicious. Then off to the meet with McT., do the deal, and drive like hell back to Great Abbey.

"I got there about four in the morning, a copper was waiting in a Panda car, outside the front door. I said I'd been seeing a woman, which was true as far as it went. Anyway, they interviewed me next morning, but I'd left the place secure and the alarm worked, so they had no bone to pick with yours truly."

He chuckled reminiscently. "Didn't half feel odd, a copper taking my statement and calling me 'sir,' and meaning it.

"Luckily, being nailed dead, Dudden decided to cough—plead guilty, ask for a string of previouses to be TIC'd, or Taken Into Consideration as we legal gentry say—and hope for a short stretch. He didn't get bail; when the police went to his drum looking for evidence, and broke the news, I expect he cut up rough. But by then, Sheena and me were on La Continong . . . for our health.

"I got the lobby door repaired, set the alarms, left a graceful but not wordy note for Dick and Avis, and popped the keys into their bank for safekeeping. The secret of being a good guest is never to linger, right?"

"You're wicked, Smooth—totally amoral."

"D'you really think so?" He simpered, the wretch took it as flattery.

Trying to puncture him, I said, "You ran a hell of a risk. It's all a bit like those TV thrillers where people get away with impossible feats because everything plays into their hands."

Smooth frowned at me. "Come again? Me, take risks?"

"But you did! Letting Dudden get copies of your keys, gambling that he'd still set off some private alarm that you'd booby-trapped ready, I

suppose. If the police hadn't been alerted, he would have got away, leaving you to take the rap. With your record, and talking your way in under a false name, you'd be doomed."

Tony Smooth's glance was pitying, the fox crouched before the hencoop.

"Do leave off. Gamble? Booby-traps? You've been reading too many of those cheap thrillers. I just rewired the alarm. You've got to laugh. Before I left the place, I switched it off, see.

"I don't know what Dennis Dudden thought he was doing, but what he did was switch it back on."



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There was no reason for it, no reason why the sheriff had been there. Nothing in his notebook, no trouble with the Hennigans lately . . .

THE MISSING AFTERNOON

by
PAUL DEPUYDT



The old man scuffed at a brown splatter soaking into the grease and manure stained wood, smearing the toe of his hightop brogans. The reporters and the ambulance were gone now, and Dave was about ready to haul the old man to town for booking. We'd already wrapped the shotgun in plastic and it lay in the trunk of Sheriff Johnson's county police cruiser. Funny, the things you notice at times like these; like, the gun's stock was cracked and the blueing was all worn off the barrel. The gun

was probably as old as the old man himself. Maybe we all looked at anything to keep our eyes off the dark smear at the foot of the sagging porch.

I tried once more with the old man before Dave led him away. "Are you sure you have nothing more to add to your statement, Mr. Hennigan?"

I found myself watching the old man's brogan again. I forced myself to study his eyes. Bleak and colorless eyes that showed nothing from within. Just two empty mirrors that reflected images of the farmyard back at me. Images as hard and worn as the calluses on the old man's knuckles.

"I already said I shot him. I said that when I called you out here. What else do you expect me to say?"

"You haven't said why you shot the sheriff, or even what he was doing here. I know of no warrants out for you or your family."

"I guess I got a little scared with all the problems old folks been having with roving gangs. I thought he was somebody here to rob me. I hollered, but he didn't stop."

I'd come to know the Hennigans pretty well through the years. I couldn't imagine the old man having been afraid of anything since he was knee-high to the three shaggy Herefords huddled on the lee side of the weather-beaten barn.

"His cruiser was parked right in open view. I know he wasn't in uniform today, but you knew Sheriff Johnson pretty well. Surely you can't expect us to believe that there's not more to this than you're saying. The sheriff told our dispatcher that he was feeling ill and going home. Instead, he came out here, and you shot him. We want to know why."

"Maybe I went a little crazy. There's some that hold I've been crazy for years." The empty mirrors reflected my own frustrated image back at me.

"Okay, Dave," I sighed. The old man didn't resist at all, but the veins jumped in his neck as Dave took him to the cruiser, grasping an arm as gnarled and sun-blackened as the cottonwood branches waving in the frigid March wind. Dave's car spewed mud and gravel as it wheeled out of the driveway and turned left, toward town. I sat down to wait for the state lab crew.

"Let's go over it again, Dave." It was a rare moment of relative calm. I pulled my insulated hunting vest on over my uniform shirt. The chilly March mornings seemed to feel colder than winter itself, even here in

the office. Not that there'd been any lack of heat of a different sort. We were front page news across the state. The governor's office was interested, and we had a "loaner" from the state homicide bureau to help us manage the case, what case there was.

Dave was propped against the wall near the heat vent. He said, "This publicity is really getting to me. I can't get straight answers out of anybody, any more. I've had a dozen different people ask me why one of us wasn't out there with Mark, and I don't know how many times I've been told that all the Hennigans are crazy animals and should all be put away."

"Well, the hearing is just a week off," I said. "We'll have to get this wrapped up this week. Now, Jane got Mark's call at the dispatch desk about two thirty Friday afternoon. Mark told her that he didn't feel well, and that he was going home early. He might well have been sick. You remember, he wasn't in uniform Friday, and he just sat here doing paperwork most of the morning. The only entry in his notebook shows one stop at Stone's Hardware just after lunch. You talked to Hugh Stone, right?"

"Just like I told you," Dave replied. "Hugh said that Mark just bought some flashlight batteries, and they made some idle chatter about each other's families. You know how crazy Mark was about his kids, especially that little one."

"I know," I replied. "Poor Mark." Maybe he wasn't the saintly hero the press was making him out to be, but he gave this county a lot of years of his life. He deserved better than being gunned down for no reason by a crazy old man. "Let's get back to Friday. That stop at Stone's is the last we know of. I can't find anything current in our logs that involves either Stone or Hennigan. Why would Mark stop to buy batteries when we have half a carton of county issue right here in the supply cabinet?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Dave said. "The only possible tie I can think of is Mrs. Stone. Isn't she some kind of relation to the Hennigans?"

"We'll have to find out," I said. "Anyway, we got Hennigan's call a little before six o'clock. The lab can only give us a two to three hour range for time of death, so Mark could have been shot at any time after two thirty or so. Hennigan could have sat out there for a long time before he worked up enough nerve to call. You placed the old man and the son, Tom Hennigan, at the feed mill on Friday morning, right?"

"That's right," Dave answered. "Nobody remembers them acting any

different than usual. The son drove over to Cranston later in the day, and the old man apparently stayed home. The son was gone all night. You know Tom Hennigan."

The lab could come up with just one partial print on the shotgun, probably old man Hennigan's. It was Number 2 shot, all in Mark's chest and stomach, with two pellets in the heart, amongst other damage. "So everything fits the little Hennigan has told us, the lab has given us every last detail about the mechanics of Mark's death, but do we really know much more than we did Friday afternoon? What if the old man shot Mark, set his gun down, and called us. If that's the way it was, then where was Mark the rest of the afternoon? It's only a fifteen minute drive to Hennigan's farm."

"Maybe our hotshot expert from the state can figure it out," said Dave. "I don't see what else we need. Hennigan still says he did it, and you've just said that everything we've got checks out that way. So he sat there in a funk for a while. So what? If it was anybody but the-sheriff, we'd already have the book closed. I hear the old man's lawyer is going to plead insanity. Hennigan won't talk to him either. He probably is nuts."

"You might be right," I said. "I'm going out to talk to Hennigan's son. Why don't you see if you can get anything more from Mrs. Stone."

I parked in the farmyard in front of a once-green John Deere tractor sitting in a lean-to shed attached to the weatherworn granary. The farm looked sunk and lost and gray. Shadows from a big cottonwood waved and danced on the farmhouse, making splashes of deeper gray on the graying shingles. The cornfield behind the barnyard feedlot hadn't been harvested last fall, and now stood all twisted and scattered from winter's ravages. Cockleburrs and milkweed grew defiantly along the fenceline. The wind had stripped the shingles off part of the corner roof. I banged on the warped screened door, thought I heard something through the heavier wooden door, and went in to find Tom Hennigan sitting in front of the woodstove in the kitchen, looking sick, or hungover, or both.

Tom was the middle of three boys, I knew, and had moved back home after his second divorce some years ago. Korea had claimed his older brother, and the younger was killed in Vietnam. It was said that young Bernie Hennigan had sat beside a downed rescue 'copter with three wounded fliers and held the Viet Cong off for over a half hour until another 'copter was able to get in. He was supposed to have had five

serious wounds when he bled to death on the way back to base. In spite of his pallor, I could feel that same kind of raw, predatory strength in the man sitting in front of me.

Tom Hennigan and I were well acquainted professionally. We'd had to bust him pretty regularly through the years: poaching, speeding, drunkenness and brawling, and general hell-raising up and down the county. The most serious charge could have occurred about two years ago. Tom was known as the kind of guy who went through women like a tornado through Kansas wheat, and a frustrated husband had had the poor judgment to catch Tom with his pants down and try to do something about it. Tom nearly killed the guy, but nobody would file charges. Like I said, I knew Tom pretty well, so I was careful to lean against the wall in a position where I could watch both his eyes and his huge hands.

"You starting early, or still going?" I asked him.

"What's it to you. You've got the old man, so why don't you leave me alone. When I drink is my business."

"Take it easy, Tom. Were you drinking when it happened, too?"

Hennigan fixed a bloodshot gaze on me as he lifted his rugged, leonine head. I could see why he was such a terror with the county's female population. Even now there was an animal force about the man, like hidden dynamos thrumming inside him.

"I already said where I was. Why don't you leave me alone."

"I know you weren't here," I replied. "I just need to wrap up the loose ends. Why was Sheriff Johnson out here? Do you have any idea?"

"Why are you guys always out here? Ain't harassing Hennigans the thing you all do best? Me and the old man are all that's left, and now you got him. Well, I'm still here, and you ain't getting me, the farm, or nothing else."

"Now slow down a minute. What does the sheriff have to do with your farm?"

"You know damn well Pa's cousins have been after this farm for years. I figure the sheriff threw in for a piece of the action. He was always on us, always trying to pin something on us. Pa fixed his sanctimonious wagon for good this time."

"He didn't do such a bad job fixing his own wagon, either," I pointed out. But I could get nothing else useful out of Hennigan. I gave him the usual admonition to keep himself available and headed back for town.

Dave was waiting for me at the office. I told him what little I'd gotten

from Tom Hennigan.

Dave said, "That might fit with what I've got. I guess it's pretty well known by the older folks, but did you know that Joe Hennigan originally settled that farm with a cousin? Both of them pretty rough cobs, even back then. They had some sort of feud and Joe ran the cousin off the farm. Mabel Stone is that cousin's daughter, and I suppose she could consider the farm to be rightfully hers. Lord knows, she hates Joe Hennigan. I thought she was going to march down here and lynch him by herself. We've got old complaints from her accusing Hennigan of growing marijuana and moonshining, and ten years ago she tried to start proceedings to have Hennigan committed. The charges have never panned out, but she could have given Mark a new one on Friday."

"You know what a stickler Mark was about proper procedure and logging all complaints. There's no complaint like that anywhere. Unless Tom Hennigan is right about Mark playing shady games."

"I can't buy that," Dave said. "I don't know of anything Mark ever pulled in the six years I've been a deputy. Either you or I would have been bound to know, and I sure don't."

"On the other hand," he finished up, "how well do we really know anybody?" He shrugged. "He said he was sick. He probably just forgot to write it down. I feel sorry for Ann and the kids. She asked us to be pallbearers, you know."

"Yeah," I answered. "I'm seeing her again tomorrow, but I'm going to stay out of the funeral, if I can."

Sheriff Johnson's house was at the end of a cul-de-sac in Southview Heights, our town's southern subdivision. There were two newer subdivisions on the north side of town, and the sheriff's house was about fifteen years old. Ann Johnson answered the doorbell with her youngest son in tow. He was at least five years younger than the next oldest boy, and like so many family "tag-ends" the boy already showed promise of being much bigger and stronger than his older brothers. Mark had bragged about him constantly, saying he was going to be a real football star, though the boy was but four, or so.

"I'm sorry to bother you again," I said.

Mrs. Johnson answered with a wan smile and led me into the living room. The room was uncomfortably warm and stuffy after the outside chill, and filled with too much furniture. The walls were covered with

various shelves and knickknacks. She gestured to a too-soft chair and then perched on the sofa.

"So there we are," I finished my summary. "Joe Hennigan has still said nothing in addition to his original statement. We know everything and yet I feel like we know nothing."

"I suppose a sheriff's wife always knows something like this can happen," she said.

I wondered how to broach the possibility of Mark's having been involved with Hennigan's cousins.

"I know we've been over this already, Ann, but are you certain Mark said nothing about going out to Hennigan's?"

I felt miserable as I caught the quick shift of pain in her eyes. This was really rough for her. The boy sensed the tenseness and clung to his mother. She squared her shoulders and sent the boy out, to play in another room.

"No, as I've said, Mark said nothing. But he rarely said anything about his work. You know yourself that the Hennigans are animals. Always in trouble. He probably got a complaint from someone."

"There's no record of any complaint in the dispatcher's log or in any file or notebook," I said.

"Well, I'm afraid I really don't understand any of this except that my husband is being buried tomorrow, and I wish there was a death penalty in this state for the foul beast who killed him. There could have been any number of reasons for Mark to go out there. Why don't you concentrate on wrapping up your case against Hennigan? I understand that if he's judged insane there won't even be a real trial or sentence."

She was speaking vehement words, but grief had driven all force from her. She spoke in a passionless tone, more resigned than anything else. I could see nothing more to be gained, so I apologized again for not being one of the pallbearers and left her to her funeral preparations.

Later, back at the office, I contemplated the ruins of a wasted day. Half a chicken salad sandwich was queasing around in my stomach, the other half in the wastebasket. We were still statewide news, no fewer than five Mark Johnson Memorial proposals had been advanced, the post office could no longer handle the letters, donations, and sympathy cards, and the town's population seemed to have increased by a third, or more. I'd just finished two grueling hours with our "loaner" from the state. Like

so many others, he considered the active portion of the case completed, and wasn't particularly concerned about why Hennigan had shot the sheriff, just so long as his confession was "clean" and would stand up at the hearing. He was right, I grudgingly admitted, that we had to try to avoid any claim of technical mismanagement which Hennigan's county-appointed attorney might accuse us of, but the people in the case seemed to have been washed away in a wave of facts, logs, lab reports, and publicity. It was almost as if Mark Johnson and Joe Hennigan had never really existed.

A session at the courthouse after I left Mrs. Johnson had also been fruitless. Whatever family fights there might have been in the past, Joe Hennigan certainly held legal title to his farm, and had since he'd paid off the mortgage in 1947. There were no liens or claims on the property from Mabel Stone, or anyone else. Family records verified Mabel Stone's relationship to Hennigan, plus the fact that she had two brothers, who evidently lived out of the county. Our own files were an interesting hodgepodge of complaints and arrests against the Hennigans going all the way back to the '30's. The most recent, as I'd known, were all against Tom Hennigan. In fact, Mark had just busted him on a "drunk and disorderly" last month. All it proved was that Joe Hennigan and his three sons were cut more from the mold of nineteenth century mountain men than twentieth century farmers, and that any one of them would have been capable of shooting a sheriff, or anyone else. But why this sheriff, who had certainly been no stranger to them, at this time?

The damp, drizzly weather seemed appropriate for a funeral. I sat and listened to all the eulogies to a shining hero I'd never known. Wasn't it enough that Mark had been a decent man who'd tried to do a good job in his work? Why can't people just be people? Mark Johnson had been an ordinary, somewhat colorless person who'd loved his kids and sheriffs' conventions. He wasn't a martyr, any more than Joe Hennigan was just the mindless animal of public opinion.

The crowd had a festive air, swelled by dozens of outsiders. I hoped Ann Johnson understood my reluctance to join the carnival. She sat quietly through the speech by the governor's aide, and all those which followed. The children were more restive. The daughter, about fourteen, sat to Ann's right, the two slim, blond older boys and the future all-state line-backer to her left. I was a little surprised to see Hugh and Mabel Stone

sitting near the Johnson family, but I decided they couldn't pass up this opportunity to demonstrate their hatred of Joe Hennigan in public. Well, that mood was sure the popular one of the day. The crowd would have climbed all over anyone who dared to say anything good about Joe Hennigan today. The Stones had become minor celebrities as the last to have seen Mark Johnson alive. Dave finally rejoined me, his duties as pallbearer at last completed, and this part of the ordeal was behind us.

A misty drizzle was falling again Friday morning as I squished grouchy into the office. I hadn't slept well again, and probably wouldn't until next Tuesday's hearing was over with. Jane, our dispatcher, clerk, handyman, and only truly indispensable member of the whole staff, was already in and doing paperwork at the dispatcher's desk. I was glad to see that she'd made coffee, and I grabbed a cup to sip with the morning paper. I slouched into my chair with my hunting vest still on, shaking a futile fist at the useless thermostat, disconnected during the last wave of energy cuts. I opened the paper, and was glad to see that we were fast becoming old news now that the funeral was past. I hoped publicity would die even further before the hearing.

"Excuse me," Jane said at my shoulder.

"What? I'm sorry, I wasn't listening."

"I said would you initial this, please? I guess you'll have to now that . . ."

"What is this?" I asked.

"It's our monthly rundown of telephone credit card calls. It came this morning. Mark just looked over them and initialed them so that I could draw a check to pay the bill."

We each had credit cards for use when we were away from the office, but I guess I've used mine less than a half-dozen times in as many years. The county phones and police radios make the cards unnecessary most of the time. Mark had apparently used his card more often. Well, he'd usually been the only one who'd made trips out of the county. Just as I was about to hand the bill back to Jane, my eye caught the date of the last entry: March 20th. That was last Friday. Quick service, I thought, even as my mind registered the fact that the call had been made during Mark's "missing" three hours, and was not listed to a local number.

A call to the phone company soon provided me with the information that the call had been made from a local pay booth, it had been charged

to Mark's card, and it had been to Billy's Ace-in-the-Hole, a bar and nightspot in Joinersville, about forty miles west, in the next county.

Billy's Ace-in-the-Hole, about two miles outside of town, was a low, rambling, wooden building which had sprouted at least three haphazard additions since it had originally been built. The parking lot was unpaved, muddy, and dotted with potholes. I bounced and sloshed up to the side of the building under the "Food, Drinks, Live Entertainment" sign and parked next to a blue Chevy, the only car in sight.

Inside, I found a slack-shouldered, balding man counting receipts behind the bar. His former muscles were all hanging around his waist, and he was chewing on the stump of an unlit cigar. He seemed vaguely familiar yet I knew that I'd never seen him before.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, looking puzzled and disgusted at the same time.

I explained that I was checking on a call made by Mark Johnson. He jumped back violently, knocking a bottle off the back bar.

"Now just a minute! That was unofficial. He said so. I don't have nothing to do with that side of the family. I don't care what Joe or Tom, either one, does. My nose is clean. I don't care who Tom brings in here, so long as he behaves."

It was my turn to be puzzled. "Hey, slow down. What are you blubbering about?"

"I know Joe shot that sheriff. But I didn't have anything to do with it. He just asked some questions about Tom. That's all. I answered, even though it was unofficial, 'cause my nose is clean, like I said. I answered, and then he left."

"You say he left. Do you mean that Sheriff Johnson was here?"

"Yessir, that's right. He called on Friday, and then he drove on over. He asked a lot of questions about Tom and showed me some pictures, and then he left. That's all I know. I don't want no trouble."

The mist was starting to clear in my mind. I looked closer at the eyes, the large frame, the once powerful shoulders.

"Sheriff Johnson was checking on Tom Hennigan?"

"Yeah, that's right. Didn't you know? Tom and me are cousins of some sort. But I don't have nothing to do with them. My sister Mabel, she's the one keeps track of such things. All I know, if Tom wants to bring his fillies over here, I don't care. Honest, I don't know what Tom and Joe

got going with your dead sheriff. I keep my nose clean, see? I just answered his questions, just like I'm answering all your questions now."

"What kind of pictures was the sheriff interested in?"

"Oh, you know. He knew Tom and me was related, and he must have figured that Tom brought women here. He had pictures of some of them."

I didn't get much more from Cousin Billy. He had recognized some of Mark's pictures, others he hadn't. Mark had showed three which were all the same person but had said nothing to Billy about any of the women. As I drove toward home, I had flickering images of eyes dancing in my mind; steely eyes; red-rimmed animal eyes, pained eyes, crying eyes. I thought again of how we're all just people, a mixture of good and bad.

Hugh Stone was glad to see me, still basking in his reflected glory. He remembered that "yes, Mabel's brother in Joinersville had been discussed during his family chitchat with Sheriff Johnson." He was quick to point out that Mabel also had a brother in California. I left him and headed for Cranston, a little town with six hundred people and three bars on the east side of the county.

I mentally kicked myself for not making a personal visit to Cranston before now. Dave and the state man had made routine calls to verify that Tom Hennigan had been in Cranston on Friday, March 20th, and had followed no further. It had not seemed that important at the time to establish the precise details of Hennigan's visit. I stopped at the Oasis and then the Arrow, and Tom had been there, all right, but not before seven o'clock when he'd shown up at the Arrow, mean-drunk and ugly. A check at the third bar verified that he'd not been in town before seven.

It was past supper time when I returned from Cranston, so I waited until morning to see Ann Johnson. She flinched when I told her of Mark's visit to the Ace-in-the-Hole, then started to cry.

"What's wrong, Mommy?"

"It's all right, honey." Ann hugged her youngest son close. Now that I knew what I was looking for, the eyes were unmistakable. The young frame was already large for the boy's age, in preparation for the huge head and shoulders he would carry as an adult. It must have killed Mark when he finally realized. But then I guess it had; literally.

"Well, now you know. But I don't see how it changes anything. All you can accomplish is to hurt Joey" (she hugged her son still closer) "and smear Mark's good name. Mark was always too proud of Joey to realize.

He treasured Joey more than anything else. I didn't know Mark had found out. I can only guess that Tom Hennigan must finally have said something to Mark. They had a bitter fight last month, you know, when Mark arrested Tom again. But Mark never said anything; I really didn't know that he knew. He never talked to me about business, even when he went away on trips or for conventions. He just didn't talk much."

I let her continue without interruption.

"I haven't seen Tom for a long time now. We really got together only a few times when Mark was gone. Even now, I don't know why. It was just an accident. He was so different from Mark; so, so . . . alive. But yet I hate him! I really do. And I loved Mark. You must believe that."

She was crying again, speaking in a rambling, choppy voice. I wasn't her judge, or her confessor, and I felt ashamed at sharing her past sins. It was time for another talk with Tom Hennigan anyway, and I extricated myself as gently as possible.

I felt a little of what Mark must have felt as I parked in the muddy farmyard again. The stains near the porch were no longer visible. Dave stood to one side of the door, and I stood on the other side and knocked loudly. I could hear no answer.

"Cover me," I said, and dived through the doorway hard and fast. I stumbled through the entry and into the kitchen, rolled left toward the stove, and straightened up. The house was still silent, and a search proved it to be empty.

We found him in the barn, throwing hay down from the mow. Our tenseness must have shown. He hit Dave in the chest with a bale of hay, tipping him against my side, and disappeared in the haymow as we scrambled to our feet.

Dave was climbing to the haymow as fast as he could when I heard Hennigan jump out of the mow into the feedlot outside. I intercepted him as he was coming over the fence, and we both went down in the mud. A fist like a sledgehammer hit my shoulder and my revolver went flying as my arm went numb. Hennigan leapt to his feet and I grabbed with my good arm. I got just enough of his pants leg to trip him slightly. He skidded in the slippery mud just as Dave came running up. Dave skidded too, like a runner sliding into second, but he caught Hennigan a glancing blow with his gun as they were falling. Hennigan spouted a stream of blood over his eye, and sat back on his haunches momentarily.

Dave shoved his revolver against Hennigan's chest and held him still while I fumbled the cuffs onto the massive wrists. They barely latched into the last notch.

The old man sat stiffly and uncomfortably on the edge of the single bed in the cell.

"So you were actually out cutting wood, and Tom was the one at the house," I was saying. "Why did you do it?"

"Damn fool chucklehead never did have no sense. I found him sitting there scratching and wondering what to do next, and I could see he wouldn't have any littlest chance."

"But it seems there was an element of self defense. I, for one, believe Tom when he says the sheriff was there to kill him. You only made it worse this way."

"A man has to try what seems best. He might not be much, but he's all I got left."

For just a flash of a moment I thought I saw something shift in the two empty mirrors reflecting my image back at me.

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Everyone had always taken advantage of Murch, but this time he was getting some help. And then he would be safe.

THE USED LOREN D. ESTLEMAN



"But I never been to Iowa!" Murch protested.

His visitor sighed. "Of course not. No one has. That's why we're sending you there."

Slouched in the worn leather armchair in the office Murch kept at home, Adamson looked more like a high school basketball player than a federal agent. He had baby-fat features without a breath of whisker and collar-length sandy hair and wore faded Levi's with a tweed jacket too

short in the sleeves and a paisley tie at three-quarter mast. His voice was changing, for God's sake. The slight bulge under his left arm might have been a sandwich from home.

Murch paced, coming to a stop at the basement window. His lawn needed mowing. The thought of it awakened the bursitis in his right shoulder. "What'll I do there? Don't they raise wheat or something like that? What's a wheat farmer need with a bookkeeper?"

"You won't be a bookkeeper. I explained all this before." The agent sat up, resting his forearms on his bony knees. "In return for your testimony regarding illegal contributions made by your employer to the campaigns of Congressmen Disdale and Reicher and Senator Van Horn, the Justice Department promises immunity from prosecution. You will also be provided with protection during the trial, and afterwards a new identity and relocation to Iowa. When you get there, you'll find a job waiting for you selling hardware, courtesy of Uncle Sam."

"What do I know about hardware? My business is with numbers."

"An accounting position seemed inadvisable on the off chance Redman's people traced you west. They'd never think of looking for you behind a sales counter."

"You said he wouldn't be able to trace me!" Murch swung around.

Adamson's lips pursed, lending him the appearance of a teenage Cupid. "I won't lie and say it hasn't happened. But in those cases there were big syndicate operations involved, with plenty of capital to spend. Jules Redman is light cargo by comparison. It's the senator and the congressmen we want, but we have to knock him down to get to them."

"What's the matter, they turn you down?"

The agent looked at him blankly.

Murch had to smile. "Come on, I ain't been in this line eighteen years I don't see how it jerks. Maybe these guys been giving your agency a hard time on appropriations, or—" He broke off, his face brightening further. "Say, didn't I read where this Van Horn is asking for an investigation into clandestine operations? Yeah, and maybe the others support him. So you sniff around till something stinks and then tell them if they play ball you'll scratch sand over it. Only they don't feel like playing, so now you go for the jugular. Am I close?"

"I'm just a field operative, Mr. Murch. I leave politics to politicians." But the grudging respect in the agent's tone was enlightening.

"What happens if I decide not to testify?"

"Then you'll be wearing your numbers on your shirt. For three counts of conspiracy to bribe a member of the United States Congress."

They were watching each other when the doorbell rang upstairs. Murch jumped.

"That'll be your escort," Adamson suggested. "I've arranged for a room at a motel in the suburbs. The local police are lending a couple of plain-clothesmen to stay there with you until the trial Monday. It's up to you whether I ask them to take you to jail instead."

"One room?" The bookkeeper's lip curled.

"There's an economy move on in Washington," Adamson got out of the chair and stood waiting. The doorbell sounded again.

"I want a color TV in the room," said Murch. "Tell your boss no color TV, no deal."

The agent didn't smile. "I'll tell him." He went up to answer the door.

He shared a frame bungalow at the motel between the railroad and the river with a detective sergeant named Kirdy and his relief, a lean, chinless officer who watched football all day with the sound turned down. He held a transistor radio in his lap; it was tuned in to the races. Kirdy looked smaller than he was. Though his head barely reached the bridge of Murch's nose, he took a size forty-six jacket and had to turn sideways to clear his shoulders through doorways. He had kind eyes set incongruously in a slab of granite. No-Chin never spoke except to warn his charge away from windows. Kirdy's conversation centered around his granddaughter, a blond tyke of whom he had a wallet full of photos. The bathroom was heated only intermittently by an electric baseboard unit and the building shuddered whenever a train went past. But Murch had his color TV.

At half past ten Monday morning, he was escorted into court by Adamson and another agent who looked like a rock musician. Jules Redman sat at the defense table with his attorney. Murch's employer was small and dark, with an old-time gunfighter's handlebar mustache and glossy black hair combed over a bald spot. Their gazes met while the bookkeeper was being sworn in, and from then until recess was called at noon Redman's tan eyes remained on the man in the witness chair.

Charles Anthony Murch—his full name felt strange on his tongue when the court officer asked him for it—was on the stand two days. His testimony was complicated, having to do with dates and transactions made through dummy corporations, and he consulted his notebook often while

the jurors stifled yawns and the spectators fidgeted and inspected their fingernails. After adjournment the first day, the witness was whisked along a circuitous route to a hotel near the airport, where Kirdy and his partner awaited their duty. On the way Adamson was talkative and in good spirits. Already he spoke of how his agency would proceed against the congressmen and Senator Van Horn after Redman was convicted. Murch was silent, remembering his employer's eyes.

The defense attorney, whitehaired and grandfatherly behind a pair of half-glasses, kept his seat during cross-examination the next morning, reading from a computer printout sheet on the table in front of him while the government's case slowly fell to pieces. Murch had thought that his dismissal from that contracting firm upstate was off the books, and he was surprised to learn that someone had penetrated his double-entry system at the insurance company he had left in Chicago. Based on this record, the lawyer accused the bookkeeper of entering the so-called campaign donations into Redman's ledger to cover his own thefts. The jurors' faces were unreadable, but as the imputation continued Murch saw the corners of the defendant's mustache rise slightly and watched Adamson's eyes growing dull.

The jury was out twenty-two hours, a state record for that kind of case. Jules Redman was found guilty of resisting arrest, reduced from assaulting a police officer (he had lost his temper and knocked down a detective during an unsuccessful search of his office for evidence), and was acquitted on three counts of bribery. He was fined a hundred dollars.

Adamson was out the door on the reporters' scurrying heels. Murch hurried to catch up.

"You just don't live right, Charlie."

The bookkeeper held up at the hissed comment. Redman's diminutive frame slid past him in the aisle and was swallowed up by a crowd of well-wishers gathered near the door.

The agent kept a twelve-by-ten cubicle in the federal building two floors up from the courtroom where Redman had been set free. When Murch burst in, Adamson was slumped behind a gray steel desk deep in conversation with his rock musician partner.

"We *had* a deal," corrected the agent, after Murch's panicky interruption. His colleague stood by brushing his long hair out of his eyes. "It was made in good faith. We gave you a chance to volunteer any information

from your past that might put our case in jeopardy. You didn't take advantage of it, and now we're all treading water in the toilet."

"How was I to know they was gonna dig up that stuff about those other two jobs? You investigated me. *You* didn't find nothing." The ex-witness's hands made wet marks on the desk top.

"Our methods aren't Redman's. It takes longer to subpoena personnel files than it does to screw a magnum into a clerk's ear and say gimme. Now I know why he didn't try to take you out before the trial." He paused. "Is there anything else?"

"Damn right there's something else! You promised me Iowa, win or lose."

Adamson reached inside his jacket and extracted a long narrow folder like the airlines use to put tickets in. Murch's heart leaped. He was reaching for the folder when the agent tore it in half. He put the pieces together and tore them. Again, and then he let the bits flutter to the desk.

For a numb moment the bookkeeper goggled at the scraps. Then he lunged, grasping Adamson's lapels in both hands and lifting. "Redman's a killer!" He shook him. The agent clawed at his wrists, but Murch's fingers were strong from their years spent cramped around pencils and the handles of adding machines. Adamson's right hand went for his underarm holster, but his partner had gotten Murch in a bearhug and pulled. The front of the captive agent's coat tore away in his hands.

Adamson's chest heaved. He gestured with his revolver. "Get him the hell out of here." His voice cracked.

Murch struggled, but his right arm was yanked behind him and twisted. Pain shot through his shoulder. He went along, whimpering. Shoved out into the corridor, he had to run to catch his balance and slammed into the opposite wall, knocking a memo off a bulletin board. The door exploded shut.

A group of well-dressed men standing nearby stopped talking to look at him. He realized that he was still holding pieces of Adamson's jacket. He let them fall, brushed back his thinning hair with a shaky hand, adjusted his suit, and moved off down the corridor.

Redman and his lawyer were being interviewed on the courthouse steps by a television crew. Murch gave them a wide berth on his way down. He overheard Redman telling the reporters he was leaving tomorrow morning for a week's vacation in Jamaica. Ice formed in the bookkeeper's

stomach. Redman was giving himself an alibi for when Murch's body turned up.

Anyway, he had eighteen hours' grace. He decided to write off the stuff he had left back at the hotel and took a cab to his house on the west side. For years he had kept two thousand dollars in cash there in case he needed a getaway stake in a hurry. By the time he had his key in the front door lock he was already breathing easier; Redman's men wouldn't try anything until their boss was out of the country, and a couple of grand could get a man a long way in eighteen hours.

His house had been ransacked.

They had overlooked nothing. They had torn up the rugs, pulled apart the sofa and easy chairs and slit open the cushions, taken pictures down from the walls and dismantled the frames, removed the back panel from the TV set, dumped out the flour and sugar canisters in the kitchen. Even the plates had been unscrewed from the wall switches. The orange juice can in which he had kept the rolled bills in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator lay empty on the linoleum.

The sheer cold logic of the operation dizzied Murch. Even after they had found the money they had gone on to make sure there were no other caches. His office alone, its contents strewn out into the passage that led to the stairs, would have taken hours to reduce to its present condition. The search had to have started well before the verdict was in, perhaps even as early as the weekend he had spent in that motel by the railroad tracks. Redman had been so confident of victory he had moved to cut off the bookkeeper's escape while the trial was still in progress.

He couldn't stay there. Probably he was already being watched, and the longer he remained the greater his chances of being kept prisoner in his own home until the word came down to eliminate him. He stepped outside. The street was quiet except for some noisy kids playing basketball in a neighbor's driveway and the snort of a power mower farther down the block. He started walking toward the corner.

Toward the bank. They'd taken his passbook, too, but he had better than six thousand in his account and he could borrow against that. Buy a used car or hop a plane. Maybe even go to Jamaica, stretch out on the beach next to Redman, and wait for his reaction. He smiled at that. Confidence warmed him, like whisky in a cold belly. He mounted the bank steps, grasped the handle on the glass door. And froze.

He was alerted by the one reading a bank pamphlet in a chair near the

door. There were no lines at the tellers' cages and no reason to wait. He spotted the other standing at the writing table, pretending to be making out a deposit slip. Their eyes wandered the lobby from time to time, casually. Murch didn't recognize their faces, but he knew the type: early thirties, jackets tailored to avoid telltale bulges. He reversed directions, moving slowly to keep from drawing attention. His heart started up again when he cleared the plate glass.

It was quarter to five, too late to reach another branch before closing, and even if he did he knew what would be waiting for him. He knew they had no intention of molesting him unless he tried to borrow money. They were running him like hounds, keeping him within range while they waited for the go-ahead. He was on a short tether with Redman on the other end.

But a man who juggled figures the way Murch did had more angles than the Pentagon. He hailed a cruising cab and gave the driver Bart Morgan's address on Whitaker.

Morgan's laundromat was twice as big as the room in back where the real business was conducted, with a narrow office between to prevent the ringing of the telephones from reaching the housewives washing their husbands' socks out front. Murch found the proprietor there counting change at the card table he used for a desk. Muscular but running to fat, Morgan had crewcut steel-gray hair and wore hornrimmed glasses with a hearing aid built into one bow. His head grew straight out of his T-shirt.

"How they running, Bart?"

"They need fixing." He reached across the stacked coins to shake Murch's hand.

"I meant the horses, not the machines."

"So did I."

They laughed. When they were through, Murch said, "I need money, Bart."

"I figured that." The proprietor's eyes dropped to the table. "You caught me short, Charlie. I got bit hard at the Downs Saturday."

"I don't need much, just enough to get out of the city."

"I'm strapped. I wish to hell I wasn't but I am." He took a quarter from one stack and placed it atop another. "You know I'd do it if I could."

The bookkeeper seized his wrist gently. "You owe me, Bart. If I didn't lend you four big ones when the Dodgers took the Series, you'd be part

of an off-ramp somewhere by now."

"I paid back every cent."

"It ain't the money, it's the doing what's needed."

Morgan avoided his friend's eyes.

"Redman's goons been here, ain't they?"

Their gazes met for an instant, then Morgan's dropped again. "I got a wife and a kid that can't stay out of trouble." He spoke quietly. "What they gonna do I don't come home some night, or the next or the next?"

"You and me are friends."

"You got no right to say that." The proprietor's face grew red. "You got no right to come in here and ask me to put my chin on the block."

Murch tightened his grip. "If you don't give it to me I'll take it."

"I don't think so." Morgan leaned back, exposing a curved black rubber grip pressing into his paunch above the waistband of his pants.

Murch said, "You'd do Redman's job for him?"

"I'll do what I got to to live, same as you."

Telephones jangled in back, all but drowned out by the whooshing of the machines out front. The bookkeeper cast away his friend's wrist. "Tell your wife and kid Charlie said goodbye." He went out, leaving the door open behind him.

"You got no right, Charlie."

Murch kept going. Morgan stood up, shouting to be heard over the racket of the front-loaders. "You should of come to me before you went running to the feds! I'd of give you the odds!"

His visitor was on the street.

Dusk was gathering when he left the home of his fourth and last friend in the city. His afflicted shoulder, inflamed by the humid weather and the rough treatment he had received at Adamson's office, throbbed like an aching tooth. His hands were empty. Like Bart Morgan, Gordy Sharp and Ed Zimmer pleaded temporary poverty, Zimmer stepping out onto the porch to talk while his family remained inside. There was no answer at Henry Arbogast's, yet Murch swore he had seen a light go off in one of the windows on his way up the walk.

Which left Liz.

He counted the money in his wallet. Forty-two dollars. He had spent almost thirty on cabs, leaving himself with just enough for a room for the night if he failed to get shed of the city. Liz was living in the old place

two miles uptown. He sighed, put away the billfold, and planted the first sore foot on concrete.

Night crept out of the shadowed alleys to crouch beyond the pale rings cast by the street lights. He avoided them, taking his comfort in the invisibility darkness lent him. Twice he halted, breathing shallowly, when cars crawled along the curb going in his direction, then he resumed walking as they turned down side streets and picked up speed. His imagination flourished in the absence of light.

The soles of his feet were sending sharp pains splintering up through his ankles by the time he reached the brickfront apartment house and mounted the well-worn stairs to the fourth floor. Outside 4C he leaned against the wall while his breathing slowed and his face cooled. Straightening, he raised his fist, paused, and knocked gently.

A steel chain prevented the door from opening beyond the width of her face. Her features were dark against the light behind her, sharper than before; the skin creased under her eyes and at the corners of her mouth. Her black hair was streaked in mouse-color and needed combing. She had aged considerably.

"I knew you'd show up," she snapped, cutting his greeting in half. "I heard all about the verdict on the six o'clock news. You want money."

"I'm lonesome, Liz. I just want to talk." He'd forgotten how quick she was. But he had always been able to soften her up in the past.

"You never talked all the time we was married unless you wanted something. I can't help you, Charlie." She started to close the door.

He leaned on it. His bad shoulder howled in outrage. "Liz, you're my last stop. They got all the other holes plugged." He told her about Adamson's broken promise, about the bank and his friends. "Redman'll kill me just to make an example."

She said, "And you're surprised?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" He controlled his anger with an effort. That had always been her chief weapon, her instinct for the raw nerve.

"There's two kinds in this world, the ones that use and the ones that get used." Her face was completely in shadow now, unreadable. "Guys like Redman and Adamson squeeze all the good out of guys like you and then throw you away. That's the real reason I divorced you, Charlie. You was headed for the junkpile the day you was born. I just didn't want to be there to see it."

"Christ, Liz, I'm talking about my life!"

"Me too. Just a second." She withdrew, leaving the door open.

He felt the old warmth returning. Same old Liz: Deliver a lecture, then turn around and come through after all. It was like enduring a sermon at the Perpetual Mission in return for a hot meal and a roof for the night.

"Here." Returning, she thrust a fistful of something through the opening. He reached for it eagerly. His fingers closed on cold steel.

He recoiled, tried to give back the object, but she'd dropped her hand. "You nuts?" he demanded. "I ain't fired a gun since the army!"

"It's all I got to give you. Don't let them find out where it came from."

"What good is it against a dozen men with guns?"

"No good, the way you're thinking. I wait tables in Redman's neighborhood, I hear things. He likes blowtorches. Don't let them burn you alive, Charlie."

He was still staring, holding the .38 revolver like a handful of popcorn, when she shut the door. The lock snapped with a noise like jaws closing.

It was a clear night. The Budweiser sign in the window of the corner bar might have been cut with an engraving tool out of orange neon. Someone gasped when he emerged from the apartment building. A woman in evening dress hurried past on a man's arm, her face tight and pale in the light coming out through the glass door, one brown eye rolling back at Murch. He'd forgotten about the gun. He put it away.

His subsequent pounding had failed to get Liz to open her door. If he'd wanted a weapon he'd have gotten it himself; the city bristled with unregistered iron. He fingered the unfamiliar thing in his pocket, wondering where to go next. His eyes came to the bright sign in the bar window.

Blood surged in his ears. Murch's robberies had all been from company treasuries, not people, his weapons figures in ledgers. Demanding money for lives required a steady hand and the will to carry out the threat. It was too raw for him, too much like crime. He started walking away from the bar. His footsteps slowed halfway down the block and stopped twenty feet short of the opposite corner. The pedestrian signal changed twice while he was standing there. He turned around and retraced his steps. He was squeezing the concealed revolver so hard his knuckles ached.

The establishment was quiet for that time of the evening, deserted but for a young bartender in a red apron standing at the cash register. The jukebox was silent. As Murch approached, the employee turned unnat-

urally bright eyes on him. The light from the beer advertisement reflecting off the bar's cherrywood finish flushed the young man's face. "Sorry, friend, we're—"

Murch aimed the .38. His hand shook.

The bartender smiled weakly.

"This ain't no joke! Get 'em up!" He tried to make his voice tough. It came out high and ragged.

Slowly the young man raised his hands. He was still smiling. "You're out of luck, friend."

Murch told him to shut up and open the cash register drawer. He obeyed. It was empty.

"Someone beat you to it," explained the bartender. "Two guys with shotguns came in an hour ago, shook down the customers, and cleaned me out. Didn't even leave enough to open up with in the morning. You just missed the cops."

His smile burned. Murch's finger tightened on the trigger and the expression was gone. The bookkeeper backed away, bumped into a table. The gun almost went off. He turned and stumbled toward the door. He tugged at the handle; it didn't budge. The sign said PUSH. He shoved his way through to the street. Inside, the bartender was dialing the telephone.

The night air stung Murch's face, and he realized there were tears on his cheeks. His thoughts fluttered wildly. He caught them and sorted them into piles with the discipline of one trained to work with assets and debits. Redman couldn't have known he would pick this particular place to rob, even had he suspected the bookkeeper's desperation would make him choose that course. Blind luck had decided whom to favor, and as usual it wasn't Charlie Murch.

A distant siren awakened him to practicalities. Soon he would be a fugitive from the law as well as from Redman; he wasn't cold enough to go back and kill the bartender to keep him from giving the police his description. He pocketed the gun and ran.

His breath was sawing in his throat two blocks later when he spotted a cab stopped at a light. He sprinted across to it, tore open the back door, and threw himself into a seat riddled with cigarette burns.

"Off duty, bub," announced the driver, hanging a puffy, stubbled face over the back of his seat. "Oil light's on. I'm on my way back to the garage to see what's wrong."

There was no protective panel between the seats. His passenger thrust the handgun in his face and thumbed back the hammer.

The driver sighed heavily. "All I got's twelve bucks and change. I ain't picked up a fare yet."

He was probably lying, but the light was green and Murch didn't want to be arrested arguing with a cabbie. "Just drive."

They passed a prowler car on its way toward the bar, its siren gulping, its lights flashing. Murch fought the urge to duck, hiding the gun instead. The county lock-up was full of men who would ice him just to get in good with Redman.

He got an idea that frightened him. He tried pushing it away, but it kept coming back.

"Mister, my engine's overheating."

Murch glanced up. The cab was making clunking noises. The warning light on the dash glowed angry red. They had gone nine blocks. "All right, pull over." The driver spun the wheel. As he rolled to a stop next to the curb the motor coughed, shuddered, and died. Steam rolled out from under the hood.

"Start counting." The passenger reached across the front seat and tore the microphone free of the two-way radio. "Don't get out till you reach a thousand. If you do, you won't have time to be sorry you did. You'll be dead." He slid out and slammed the door on six.

He caught another cab four blocks over, this time without having to use force. It was a twenty-dollar ride out to the posh residential district where Jules Redman lived. He tipped the cabbie five dollars. He had no more use for money.

The house was a brick ranchstyle in a quiet cul-de-sac studded with shade trees. Murch found the hike to the front door effortless; for the first time in hours he was without pain. On the step he took a deep breath, let half of it out, and rang the bell. He took out the gun. Waited.

After a lifetime the door was opened by a very tall young man in a tan jacket custom made to contain his enormous chest. It was Randolph, Redman's favorite bodyguard. His eyes flickered when he recognized the visitor. A hand darted inside his jacket.

The reports were very loud. Murch fired a split-second ahead of Randolph, shattering his sternum and throwing off his aim so that the second bullet entered the bookkeeper's left thigh. He had never been shot before; it was oddly sensationless, like the first time he had had sex. The body-

guard crumpled.

Murch stepped across him. He could feel the hot blood on his leg, nothing else. Just then Redman appeared in an open doorway beyond the staircase. When he saw Murch he froze. He was wearing a maroon velour robe over pajamas and his feet were in slippers.

The bookkeeper was motionless as well. What now? He hadn't expected to get this far. He had shot Randolph in self-defense; he couldn't kill a man in cold blood, not even this one, not even when that was the fate he had planned for Murch.

Redman understood. He smiled under his mustache. "Like I said before, Charlie, you just don't live right."

Another large man came steadily through a side door, towed by an automatic pistol. He was older than Randolph and wore neither jacket nor necktie, his empty underarm holster exposed. This was the other bodyguard. He held up before the sight that met his eyes.

"Kill him, Ted," Redman said calmly.

Murch's bullet splintered one of the steps in the staircase. He'd aimed at the banister, but that was close enough. "Next one goes between your boss's eyes," he informed the bodyguard.

Ted laid his gun on the floor and backed away from it, raising his hands.

The bookkeeper felt no triumph. He wondered if it was fear that was making him numb or if he just didn't care. To Redman: "Over here."

Redman hesitated. Murch cocked the revolver. The racketeer approached cautiously.

"Pick that up." Murch indicated Randolph's gun lying where he had dropped it when he fell. "Slow," he added, as Redman stooped to obey.

He accepted the firearm between the thumb and forefinger of his free hand and dropped it carefully into a pocket to avoid smearing the fingerprints. To Ted: "Get the car."

Murch was waiting in front with his hostage when the bodyguard drove the Cadillac out of the garage. "Okay, get out," he told Ted.

He made Redman get behind the wheel and climbed in on the passenger's side. "Start driving. I'll tell you what turns to make." He spoke through clenched teeth. His leg was starting to ache and he was feeling light-headed from the blood loss.

The bodyguard watched them until they reached the end of the driveway. Then he swung around and sprinted back inside.

"He'll be on the phone to the others in two seconds," jeered Redman.

"How far you think you'll get before you bleed out?"

"Turn right," Murch directed.

The big car took the bumps well. Even so, each one was like a red-hot knife in the bookkeeper's thigh. He made himself as comfortable as possible without taking his eyes off the driver, the revolver resting in his lap with his hand on the butt. He welcomed Redman's taunts. They distracted him from his pain, kept his mind off the drowsiness welling up inside him like warm water filling a tub. He wasn't so far from content.

The dead bodyguard would take explaining. But a paraffin-test would reveal that he'd fired a weapon recently, and the gun in Murch's pocket was likely registered to Randolph. Redman's prints on the butt and the fact that Randolph worked for him, together with the bullet in Murch's leg and a clear motive in his testimony in the bribery trial, would put his old boss inside for a long time for attempted murder. "Left here."

The lights of the 14th Precinct were visible down the block. Detective Sergeant Kirdy's precinct, the home of the kind, proud grandfather who had protected Murch during the trial. Murch told Redman to stop the car. It felt good to give him that last order. Charlie Murch had stopped being one of the used.

He recognized Kirdy's blocky shape hastily descending the front steps as he was following Redman out the driver's side and called to him. The sergeant shielded his eyes with one hand against the glare of the headlamps, squinted at the two figures coming toward him, one limping, the other in a bathrobe being pushed out ahead. He drew his magnum from his belt holster. Murch gestured to show friendship. The noise the policeman's gun made was deafening, but Murch never heard it.

"That was quick thinking, sergeant." Hands in the pockets of his robe, Redman looked down at his late captor's body spreadeagled in the gutter. A crowd was gathering.

"We got the squeal on your kidnapping a few minutes ago," Kirdy said. "I was just heading out there when you two showed."

"You ought to make lieutenant for this."

The sergeant's kind eyes glistened. "That'd be great, Mr. Redman. The wife and kids been after me for years to get off the street."

"You will if there's any justice. How's that pretty granddaughter of yours, by the way?"

Dibble had never expected to have his work at the museum put to such a trial.

THE LONG NIGHT OF SIR DIBBLE

by
**WADE
MOSBY**



Howard W. Dibble, a loyal civil servant at Central Municipal Museum for twenty-seven years, had always told himself that he had no aspirations for advancement. His needs were simple, he had no immediate family, and his one consuming interest was medieval warfare.

At the museum, he was as close to the days of chivalry as one could possibly get, and he saw to it that the suits of armor entrusted to his care were always free of rust, well oiled, and in good enough working order

that a knight could stroll in and take one off the floor for that day's jousting.

Dibble knew this to be so. He was not a large man, but neither were the knights whose armor had ended up in his guardianship, and the best specimens fit Dibble very nicely. He not infrequently put on a complete set of armor that he had cleaned and repaired, and in the late hours, when no one was about, he paced the museum corridors, testing knees and elbows particularly.

Malfunctions in these crucial hingeings would mean the early demise of the wearer in battle. At such times, as he was pacing, if Dibble thought heroic thoughts involving maidens in distress and waiting to be saved, who could blame him?

Dibble's job description didn't call for him to test drive the merchandise, but his late hour strolls gave him an enormous sense of satisfaction, knowing that his displays were functional.

Nonetheless, Dibble thought as he opened his brown bag lunch, it was gratifying to have one's work recognized. Just that morning, Dr. Rudolph D. Dornbook, curator of history and Dibble's superior, had called him into his office.

"Mr. Dibble," he had said, "your work with our armor collection has not gone unnoticed. At my request, the trustees have appointed you Assistant Curator IV. That puts you full-time in our medieval warfare collection. And, of course, there will be a few more dollars on your check each month."

Dibble was dumbstruck. His gratitude for such a windfall bubbled up toward this remote man who customarily was so busy that he seldom talked to his staff. But words eluded Dibble. He couldn't articulate what was within him, and tears welled in his eyes.

"There, there, Dibble!" Dr. Dornbook said. "It's a small thing, but you have earned it. If you'll excuse me now, I have quite a few things to get at. History doesn't stop, you know."

Dibble made incoherent noises, bowed, and fled. He stopped near the American Bison exhibit and mopped his eyes before returning to his armor.

Dibble usually made double use of his lunch break by reading while he munched on his peanut butter sandwich, but today his mind kept drifting from the printed words. He wondered if museum visitors would recognize the change in his status—Assistant Curator IV! Dibble wished he had someone to talk to about the great events of the day, but there

was no one he was close to.

He meticulously peeled the banana he had brought for dessert and slowly ate it. If he had known that he would have such an occasion to celebrate today, he might have brought a small can of chocolate pudding, also. He went to the museum cafeteria and treated himself to a large éclair.

When he returned to the armor room, his thin shoulders were back and his stride was almost jaunty. He settled into a chair behind the large bookcase. Something should be done about classifying all of this information, and he decided to give the matter his full attention.

What happened next was absolutely unthinkable. Dibble, stuffed with satisfaction, peanut butter, one banana, and a large éclair, dozed off.

He had been trying to calculate in his mind how many years it would take to accumulate \$10,000 if he put all of his \$10 a week raise into a savings account. Then, perhaps, he could find a small house with a garden, and . . . It was quite dark when he came back from Camelot, and it took him a minute or two to realize where he was. He could just make out the time on the big clock above the knight on horseback. It was a little after ten. P.M.

Dibble was mortified. He had betrayed the trustees by napping on the job. He had stolen an afternoon from Dr. Dornbook. Dibble's duty was clear: he would repay every hour, all four of them, by working until two A.M. He could explain things easily enough if a janitor looked in on him. It was the only way to make amends.

He adjusted his rimless glasses and spent the next two hours or so checking the rivets, hinges, and straps of the museum's latest acquisition, a full suit of Gothic armor, made in Augsburg about 1480. Dibble's practiced eye admired the cunning of the original armorer, a man of genius and artistry.

A dab of oil on all working parts finished the job. Dibble checked everything once again and then began the laborious job of putting it on himself. It wasn't easy, but he had learned to get into these things alone.

He slipped a pair of huge sheepskin boots over the metal shoes before putting them on. He wasn't concerned about the museum's marble floors; he didn't want to wear out the metal shoes.

Everything seemed to be in place, but Dibble made last minute adjustments on the visor. He could see only a slit of what was ahead of him and very little to the sides. He had often wondered how many knights

had been blindsided by crafty but unchivalrous foes.

His first steps were squeakless, and Dibble, pleased, made his way to the corridor overlooking the first floor lobby, one hand on the great two-edged sword at his side to keep it from rattling against the steel tassels at his hips. There was scarcely a sound, save for the shuffle of sheepskin against marble.

Here goes Sir Howard, Knight of the Soft Shuffle, setting out to do battle, he thought to himself. He padded along to the top of the staircase that led to the lobby.

Something was squeaking after all, he realized. He paused and immediately determined, with some relief, that the small sounds were not in or on him, but came from the lobby. He tilted his head for a better view and in the dim light below made out the figure of a man working away at one of the lobby display cases with a pry bar.

Dibble was shaken. That man was trying to steal the Van Ryzin diamond collection! Where could the guards be? Another head adjustment revealed both of them, bound and gagged, on the floor beneath the display case.

Dibble suddenly found his armor not only heavy but insufferably hot. There was no quick way to solve this quest. He would have to make his way back to the armor room, remove his helmet and gloves, and call for help.

Trying to be extraordinarily quiet, Dibble made a laborious turnabout. He took a step forward and found himself momentarily in space. And then he went plunging down the stairway, clanging and banging to the bottom. He got to his feet, still clutching his sword. He could only manage a crouch. There was excruciating pain in his knees when he tried to stand erect, and a gasp of anguish escaped from the visor.

The man with the pry bar stood stupefied as he gazed at the metal apparition crouched menacingly before him, holding a half-drawn blade. He considered running for it, then reached into a knapsack and produced a snub-nosed .38 revolver.

"Hold it right there, King Arthur," he rasped.

Dibble, his head encased in steel and ringing from his flight down the stone stairs, heard not a word. Nor could he see anything with the helmet visor jammed above his eyebrows. He moved his head back and forth, trying to find a sliver of light. His floundering steps took him closer to the trembling .38.

There was the most enormous noise.

The bullet ricocheted off Dibble's helmet. Oh, Lord, he thought, he'll ruin this armor! Dibble threw himself in the direction of the floor to avoid further shots. His fall took with him the gunman, under 138 pounds of Dibble and eighty-five pounds of armor. The .38 skittered across the floor as the gunman's head whacked the solid squares of marble.

Dibble struggled with the visor and pried it open. He recognized Wilson, one of the night guards. He shook off his iron gloves and untrussed him. "Get his gun before he puts more dents in things," Dibble said.

"Mr. Dibble? That you?"

"Get the gun," Dibble said. "And call the police."

The police arrived promptly, along with a fire department rescue squad. A sergeant, first through the doorway, took in the scene, especially Dibble, crouched like some great toad waiting to jump.

"Costume party, mister?" he inquired.

"Get me out of this armor!" Dibble groaned. "Knees! Knees!"

"Drag him out to the truck so we can cut him out of this stuff," said the sergeant.

"No! No! Not outside! It's raining!" Dibble croaked.

"What's the difference?" the sergeant said. "It won't shrink, will it?"

"Rust, you idiot!" Dibble yelled.

"Have it your way. Bring the can opener in here, Sam."

"Don't cut it!" Dibble said. "Just listen to me."

Two firemen followed Dibble's detailed instructions and eventually had the armor in one pile and Dibble in another. Dibble checked his glasses and then began a minute inspection of the armor.

"I thought you'd hurt your knees," the sergeant said.

"I certainly did. I bent both of them so bad going down the steps that I couldn't stand up straight," Dibble said.

"Want us to call a bone man?"

"Never mind. I can fix them myself with a little solder and a few rivets. What help would a doctor be?"

The sergeant looked at Dibble for a long time.

"Maybe this other guy," he said. "He's still out cold. What did you hit him with?"

"I didn't lay a glove on him. I fell on him. It was an accident."

"That's right, officer," Wilson said. "Me and Barber here seen it all—ain't that right, Tom?"

Tom nodded.

At that moment Dr. Dornbook came bustling in.

"Dibble! I heard all about it from the police, and I came right down. Are you hurt, man?"

"No, sir," said Dibble. "But it will be a couple of weeks before the Augsburg armor will be back on view."

"How much ice is in that display case?" asked the sergeant.

"The gems alone are worth about two million." Dr. Dornbook turned back to his Assistant Curator IV. "I would guess that our insurance company might have a little reward for your work, Dibble. Probably \$10,000 or so."

The day had been too much for the Knight of the Soft Shuffle. He fainted in a heap beside the Augsburg armor.

"Tell the doctor to hurry, Sam," said the sergeant. "We've got two of them out, now."

"Oh, and tell him to bring rivets."

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The gold and jewelled Edmundson Chalice was valuable—very—but Mrs. Printer-Wolfe had something even more important on her mind.

THE PROFESSOR, THE RAT AND THE EMPTY STORE

BY JOHN
HULME



“You don’t smoke, do you?” he asked me. I shook my head. “Then you wouldn’t appreciate this.” He plunged his hand into a large polythene bag and pulled out a fist full of crinkly brown shredded leaves, which he promptly pushed under my nose. “This is the best grade of air-cured Burley. I get it from Europe where they know how to ferment a good tobacco. Let me give you some advice, always smoke Dutch or English pipe tobacco, never American. The stuff you buy over here is twenty

percent additives. Our government allows manufacturers to add all kinds of things from licorice, sugar, honey, and rum to tonka beans in what they call 'casings sauce.' Don't try it; stick to the real thing. I begin with a well-fermented air-cured Burley and add my own mixture of flue-cured Virginia, light-bodied Macedonian and a pinch of Perique. Never latakia, it makes you smell like a perfume factory."

I was well aware of Professor Wodeash's liking for his own blend of pipe tobacco, and over the years he had converted half the faculty in the Biology Department. Since I was the newest and most junior member of that group, the professor considered it his sacred duty to preach the gospel to me at every opportunity. Even though I persistently told him I was not interested in joining his smoking club.

The professor, as everyone called him, was a well known character around the campus. He was short, below average height, and his rounded, balding head could frequently be seen bobbing animatedly across the south lawn as he discoursed to his students on the way to class. His lectures frequently began outside the classroom and went on long after the period was over and all but the most dedicated students had departed. That never bothered him. He would peer from his sharp blue eyes over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses, "tut tut" at the lack of seriousness among modern youth, and go on talking as if nothing had happened. The next lecturer in the room often had to eject him forcibly or he would simply have continued forever.

We were sitting in his office at the end of the long science building. Years ago he had ferretted out this cubbyhole and filled it with the treasures of fifty years' collecting. Nominally he was an animal physiologist, but he knew so much about every aspect of biology he could teach practically anything. He was seated at the moment in an overstuffed, very non-regulation armchair with a sawdust-filled owl wired to one side of the headrest. That owl could be very disconcerting and I had seen students fix their eyes in hypnotic fashion on it throughout an entire interview with the professor. He said it gave him a psychological advantage when they came to complain about grades.

I had grown used to it now, but when I met the professor it had profoundly influenced my own first conversation with him.

Since then we had grown to be friends and I was in the habit of leaving the small office I shared with three other junior faculty and a cat to spend my free time with Professor Wodeash in his cluttered sanctuary.

"Your strange aversion to the fumitory *Nicotiana* is hard to comprehend," he said sadly, shaking his head and throwing the bag of Burley into one corner of the room. I smiled and refused to be drawn into an argument I couldn't win. He was flicking small flakes of fallen tobacco from his vest, about to begin again his arguments in favor of Jean Nicot's weed, when there was a sharp, irate knock at the door. He didn't have time to answer, but answering wasn't necessary. The door opened crisply and in marched a tall, spare woman with a bird-like face. She swept away a pile of the professor's papers from his desk and picked up the buried telephone.

The receiver had not been in its cradle.

"You do this on purpose, don't you?" She waved the offending instrument in the air before slamming it down on the desk again. "I have been trying to reach you for thirty minutes, all the while thinking your telephone was engaged."

"I most humbly apologize, Mrs. Cluny," said the professor, putting his chin down and trying to look ashamed.

"Humph!" fumed Mrs. Cluny. "I don't believe it."

"Could you tell me what you would be wanting me for?" asked Wodeash. He slipped a slight Irish accent into his speech. Mrs. Cluny affected not to notice, but her manner softened.

"The dean would like to see you right away. He has some important visitors with him who want to speak to you," she told him.

"Then I must drop everything and come at once," exclaimed the professor in mock concern. "We must not keep the good dean waiting. Lead the way." He pushed himself out of his chair, ran his fingers ineffectually through what was left of his hair, and squeezed around from behind his desk.

"You'll come too?" he said to me, and it was the black look that Mrs. Cluny, the dean's secretary, gave me that made me say yes. "Good, good, come on then." So began the chain of events the dean would later call "The Professor, the Rat, and the Empty Store."

Mrs. Cluny did not come with us into the dean's inner office. Professor Wodeash beat her to the door and opened it without knocking, pushing me inside first. If the dean minded this unannounced intrusion he got over it fast.

"Ah, good afternoon; Mrs. Printer-Wolfe this is Professor Wodeash,

one of our more distinguished biologists. He should be able to help you."

"That is 'Wudash,'" the professor corrected him. The dean had deliberately said "Woadash" because he knew how much the professor hated having his name pronounced in its Anglicized form. "Pleased to meet you Mrs. Printer-Wolfe." With considerable charm and old world courtesy the professor lifted the hand of the dean's visitor and kissed it.

"And this is her son, Mr. Julius Printer-Wolfe," the dean went on, indicating a second visitor who was sitting in one corner of the room and scowling at everyone.

Two more dissimilar people it would have been hard to imagine. Mrs. Printer-Wolfe was a striking woman, about seventy-five years old, with an aluminum grey consortium of hair neatly regimented into a high, swept back wave. From the widow's peak a streak of jet black hair knifed its way straight back over her head, making her slightly raccoon-like. The clothes she was wearing were at least twenty years out of date, so she looked as if she had just stepped out of a period movie.

Mr. Julius Printer-Wolfe, on the other hand, had black tightly curled hair, a dark complexion, and an irritating way of picking at the skin around his fingernails as he talked. He looked and behaved like a sullen schoolboy.

"Mrs. Printer-Wolfe is here today to make arrangements for the ceremony next Wednesday," explained the dean, and then, seeing the blank look on Wodeash's face, he hurried on: "Mrs. Printer-Wolfe is presenting the college with a most magnificent gift, her late husband's gold and jewelled chalice, the famous Edmundson Cup. We will be having a dedication ceremony after class on Wednesday. All the faculty will be expected to be there," he added pointedly.

"A truly generous and munificent gesture," said the professor, throwing his hands wide. Mr. Julius snorted derisively behind us.

"Quiet, Julius," snapped Mrs. Printer-Wolfe over her shoulder, and the middle-aged son snarled silently in his chair.

"My late husband, Dickfield Printer-Wolfe, was an alumnus of this college, and although he willed the Edmundson Chalice to our son Julius when he died, I have always felt he really wanted to be remembered at his old alma mater through the dedication of the chalice to this place of learning." I could see that son Julius did not hold the same opinion of his father's wishes, which could explain his present attitude, but his mother was not the sort of woman to let little things like that stand in her way.

"While I was here with Dean Silverman it occurred to me that a college

with these resources should be able to help me in a small matter." Mrs. Printer-Wolfe paused and the dean nodded so hard I thought his head was going to fall off. "So I asked him if there were any of his staff who could be of assistance." She said the word "staff" like a person used to commanding servants.

"Yes, dear lady, how may we help you?" said Wodeash, rolling the words around his tongue.

"Rats," said Mrs. Printer-Wolfe.

"Rats?" said Wodeash, puzzled.

"Yes, rats. I have heard rats in my apartment and need help getting rid of them."

"Oh, I see," said Wodeash, brightening. "Why don't you call in an exterminator?"

"Never," exclaimed Mrs. Printer-Wolfe firmly. "I will not have strangers in my house. You cannot trust them. Never."

"Mrs. Printer-Wolfe is very particular about whom she admits into her home," said the dean, trying to make a phobia seem normal.

"Very peculiar, you mean," said Julius with a sneer.

"Quiet, Julius," retorted his mother and Julius returned to his self-destructive finger picking.

"I told Mrs. Printer-Wolfe you were our expert on rats," the dean said to Wodeash, and his eyes held a pleading look.

"Of course," said Wodeash jovially. "There is nothing I don't know about rats. We will have the little rascals out of there in no time at all. Leave the matter in our hands, dear Mrs. Printer-Wolfe, and all will be well." I could scarcely believe my eyes, but the upright old lady drank it all in and seemed satisfied.

"Good. Come to my apartment at three o'clock tomorrow," she said, standing up and pulling on her gloves.

"It shall be done," said Wodeash, bowing extravagantly. The Printer-Wolfe party left under full sail, and we could see the dean mopping his brow as we trooped out after them.

We returned to Wodeash's office by way of the botany storeroom where the professor spent some time searching among the bulb and root collection.

"Ah," he grunted, pulling out a grubby specimen, "*Urginea maritima*, the onion or Red Squill. Just what I need."

"You are going to kill rats with that?" I asked. "How? By hitting them

on the head one by one?"

He looked at me pityingly. "Young colleague, you have a lot to learn." He lifted down a large pan from a shelf and set it on a warming plate. "This Mediterranean bulb contains a glucoside which is toxic to rats, but does not seem to be harmful to other animals. It has been used since ancient times and is the basis of Henry Wodeash's secret rat poison. Come, I will show you." He peeled off the outermost layers of the sea onion bulb and carefully sliced up the inner fleshy scales. Then he mixed in some lard and beef suet and fried it in the pan. A strange odor filled the room. Reaching onto the shelf behind him he picked off bottles containing salicylic acid, barium carbonate, and a twenty percent solution of ammonium copper acetate which he mixed into the lard and squill fry-up until he obtained a stiff mess. This he shaped into small cakes and set them out to dry.

"Perfect," he muttered as he patted down the gooey concoction. "This has never been known to fail. Accompany me tomorrow and you will see wonders performed."

The next day, a little before three o'clock, we collected the homemade rat poison and made our way, on foot, to the home of Mrs. Printer-Wolfe. Mrs. Cluny had grudgingly given us the address, which turned out to be surprisingly near the college. During the latter part of our walk, while Wodeash was discoursing at length on the subject of human bones and their breaking point, we passed down a quiet commercial street composed of single family Mom and Pop stores. Near the end of the block was a vacant shop, boarded over and covered in "For Rent" signs. Two men were standing outside arguing animatedly, one of them waving a piece of paper.

"But I'm the legal tenant, I tell you. I signed a contract last Friday. I demand that you let me into this store immediately." The man holding the paper was growing increasingly agitated, but the large man with the flat hat stood firmly in the doorway and would not let the new tenant past him.

"I'm sorry," he was saying. "I have no instructions regarding any new tenant, and I'm not letting you in without proper authority."

"This is crazy," shouted the man with the paper.

"Can I help?" asked Wodeash. I had already walked two paces beyond them before I realized I had lost my companion.

"Keep out of this, you," said the big man, staring down threateningly

at the professor. Wodeash blinked at him, then turned his gaze on the new tenant.

"You have hired these premises?" he asked.

"That is correct," fumed the new tenant, "and now this ape won't let me in so I can begin remodeling."

"Why not?" asked Wodeash, turning back to the guardian of the store, who seemed to be getting taller and broader every minute.

"None of your business. Get lost," said the big man. His argument made a lot of sense, so I grabbed the professor and pulled him round the corner and out of danger.

Mrs. Printer-Wolfe's apartment was on the residential street running parallel to the commercial street we had just left. I rang the bell.

"Oh, yes, she is expecting you," said the small, timid maid who answered. "Come with me, please." We climbed an oak flight of stairs to the parlor floor. I don't know what I had been expecting, but it was nothing to what I saw. We were ushered into one long room, the size of a modest tennis court, which ran the whole length of the building. On the floor was a single piece of Asian carpet that must have taken a hundred skilled Iranian weavers a year to make. And on and arranged around the carpet was a collection of furniture that would not have looked out of place in an English palace. I had just gotten down to admiring a Rembrandt on one wall when Mrs. Printer-Wolfe entered from a rosewood framed doorway.

"Good afternoon, professor, kind of you to come."

"Not at all, dear lady, it is our privilege."

"Tea?"

"Why, thank you." The maid was summoned for the brew.

"Now," said the professor rubbing his hands, "where seems to be the trouble?"

"Over there," said Mrs. Printer-Wolfe, pointing to the back of the room. Wodeash walked away from us and for a moment I thought he was going to pray. He dropped to his knees in a corner and looked for all the world like a man about to bow his head. The sudden change in attitude clearly startled Mrs. Printer-Wolfe as well.

"Come here, junior colleague," called the professor. "Hold this," he commanded and he picked up one corner of the heavy carpet. From an inner pocket of his jacket he removed a small silver hammer and began to tap on the floor boards. Tap, tap-tap, tap-click, tap, tap. He covered

quite a large area, then stood up with a frown. Ignoring me standing there with a corner of the carpet clutched in my hands, he strode over to the window at the back of the room and pressed his nose against a pane of glass.

"Put that down," he said, turning back to me. "What do you see out here?" I joined him at the window.

"Not much," I said. "Just the street we came along and the spot where you almost got your head knocked off." The Printer-Wolfe apartment stretched from one street clear across the entire block to the commercial street on the other side. Beneath our feet must have been one of the stores. I told him that.

"Exactly," he exclaimed and padded off back across the carpet to Mrs. Printer-Wolfe, who must have been wondering what she had gotten involved with. He extracted the rat poison from his coat pocket but did not give it to her. Instead he asked: "Have any of you actually seen a rat in this apartment?"

"Oh, no," replied Mrs. Printer-Wolfe, looking quite shocked.

"Then how do you know that there are rats here? This does not seem a likely abode for our rodent friends."

"I have heard them, I tell you," insisted the lady. "Over there where you were kneeling. They make noises under the floor boards."

"Pattering noises, as if they were running around?"

"No," she hesitated. "More like chewing noises, as if they were gnawing their way through wood."

"And when do you hear these sounds?"

"Sometimes late at night, but lately in the evenings as well."

"Never during the day?"

"No."

"Do you go out much?" the professor asked.

"Very rarely," she told him. "Since my husband died I seldom leave this place except to visit my daughter Sandra." Her face softened as she said that name. "She came to us late in life, Professor Wodeash, and was a favorite of both Dickfield and myself. She has a small shop that sells prints and photographs over in Telford Square and a small set of rooms nearby. I go over there occasionally when I am invited." From the way Mrs. Printer-Wolfe said the last sentence I could tell that invitations from her daughter came all too infrequently.

"And your son, what does he do?"

Mrs. Printer-Wolfe's face hardened at once and the warm tone vanished from her voice.

"Julius is in real estate."

"Ah."

"Now what about these rats, professor." The momentary pleasant interlude was over.

"Ask the maid to put down this poison in small amounts in the kitchen area," said Wodeash, still thinking of something else. "And don't leave out any liquids; the poison makes them thirsty when they eat it. Do you own this entire building?"

Mrs. Printer-Wolfe bristled slightly at the question as if she had been asked something rude, but answered anyway: "My husband owned all the property on this block."

"Even the stores down there?" asked the professor, pointing to the other end of the room where we had been working.

"Everything. Of course most of it is rented to other tenants."

"And do you rent them yourself?" inquired the professor politely.

"No," said the lady curtly. "I have nothing to do with business. Julius handles all that sort of thing."

"I see, I see," mused Wodeash. "Well, we seem to have taken up a lot of your time, dear lady. My colleague and I must be going now. Please let me know if the rat poison is successful; it is one of my own recipes."

The maid came to show us to the door, and just as we were about to leave Wodeash turned round and spoke again.

"Two more questions, please, Mrs. Printer-Wolfe. Where is your son's place of business?"

"At Grosvenor and Market Street," she said.

"And when are you next going out?"

She looked startled at this question, as did I, but she said: "On Tuesday I am having dinner with my daughter—the night before the ceremony at the college. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing, nothing," replied Wodeash, bowing and backing towards the stairs. "Just wondering about the nocturnal habits of rats. Goodbye, dear lady."

We left and I caught a glimpse of a perplexed Mrs. Printer-Wolfe as we descended to the front door. But her perplexity was no greater than my own.

"What on earth was that all about?" I asked Wodeash as we went out

onto the street.

"I'll explain in the cab," he said and hurried off down the block and round the corner.

"What cab!" I exclaimed, running after him. "We don't need a cab to get back to the college."

"We are not going back to the college," he retorted and waved his arms to attract the attention of the passing taxis.

"But why not, what are you doing?"

He didn't answer; he just bundled me and himself into a dirty vehicle that passed, only barely, for hire transportation. He gave the driver an address that sounded familiar, then threw himself back in the seat and began wiping his glasses with a very large red linen handkerchief.

"We haven't much time," he panted, somewhat out of breath. "Today is Friday and it is already late in the afternoon. If we are to save Mrs. Printer-Wolfe, we must hurry."

"Save Mrs. Printer-Wolfe," I almost shouted. "What are you talking about?"

The professor fiddled with the arm of his glasses and balanced them carefully on the end of his nose; then he looked over them in my direction, pushed his handkerchief back into a bulging pocket, and spoke. "Mrs. Printer-Wolfe is in some danger. Not personally, but nevertheless she is being threatened. Never being one to abandon a lady in distress, I have taken it upon myself to render her my assistance and I would welcome your helping me."

"Of course," I said a shade too quickly. I had been in one or two other little adventures sponsored by the professor and should have known by now that I could be letting myself in for a lot of trouble. He had the habit of poking his nose into other people's affairs and of getting involved in their troubles. Several times since I had gotten to know him he had dragged me into "personal problem solving sessions," as he called them, and once we had come very close to being frozen to death in a meat freezer, trapped there by an angry husband who was also smuggling stolen beef in from the midwest.

"Excellent!" he said. "I knew I could count on you. The youth of today lacks many qualities my generation used to cherish, but courage does not seem to be one of them." He leaned back in his seat, put his head against the window, and closed his eyes. He still had not told me why Mrs. Printer-Wolfe needed our unasked-for assistance.

The cab pulled over to the side of the road in a business district near the center of the city. Market Street, a busy thoroughfare, ran to our left and we had turned off into a quieter street that was lined with sedate offices. The professor paid the cab driver and tipped him with a silver dollar, as was his custom (this habit had saved his life on one of his investigations), and we stood on the curb looking up at a green glass window on the first floor that said in gold letters: "J. Wolfe, Estate Agent."

"Julius?" I asked. "What do you want with him?"

"Just a few questions," the professor replied, and we went through the ground floor door, up the stairs, and into a small reception room where a pretty secretary was sitting behind a desk typing letters. When she saw us she smiled automatically and said, "Can I help you?"

"We would like to speak to Mr. Printer-Wolfe if he is in, please," the professor told her with one of his best fatherly smiles. She beamed back at him, and I noticed, as I have done on previous occasions, that young women find him very attractive. Perhaps they want to mother him, I said to myself hopefully.

"Surely," she breathed and leaned forward over the desk to press an intercom buzzer. "Two gentlemen to see you, Mr. Wolfe." There was an unintelligible answer which the young lady interpreted for us. "Go right in," she said and pointed at a second door to the right of the desk. Wodeash smiled again and gave the merest bow of his head. I thought the secretary was going to simper.

We went into the office indicated and found son Julius much as we had left him the last time.

"Oh, it's the rat professor," he said as he saw us, and sat down again. He had been on the point of standing up to greet us as we came in.

"Mr. Printer-Wolfe," began the professor, but he was interrupted.

"I don't use that name, Woadash," he said. "That's my mother's name. I prefer straight 'Wolfe,' thank you."

"Not at all," said the professor smoothly. "Mr. Wolfe, and I, you recall, prefer Wudash."

"Now that we have got all that settled, what do you want?" Mr. Wolfe's disposition did not seem to have improved, but he had at least stopped his self-destructive habits. Here, on his own turf as it were, he seemed more self-confident.

"Just a few questions, please, if you have time?" said the professor urbanely, seating himself uninvited in the best chair. I took the hard one

near the door. "I assume you are not in favor of your mother's gift to the college?"

The snarl was visible in the reply. "That chalice is mine. My father always promised it to me while he was still alive and specifically left it to me in his will."

"Then why don't you have it?"

"Because my mother refuses to hand it over and is now going to give it away."

"But if it is yours, how can she do that?"

"Simple. She gave me an alternative. Either I allow her to donate the chalice to your place or she withdraws her capital from my business. She gave me the money to start this concern, and I also do most of the managing of her various properties. Without her patronage I would soon go broke." I noticed he had started picking his fingers again the moment the subject of his mother came up.

"I see," mused the professor, rubbing his chin. "Then you are not donating the Edmundson Chalice voluntarily?"

"No, under extreme protest."

"Is it valuable?"

"Yes, but I don't know how much it's worth."

"Then, if you don't mind my saying so, wouldn't you be better off taking the chalice and forfeiting your mother's patronage?"

"Huh!" he laughed. "I couldn't sell that thing even if I owned it. It has too much sentimental value. No, my mother has all the angles figured. I lose either way."

"You don't get along well with your mother then?"

Again he gave a bitter laugh. "No, never have. I liked my father but when Sandra, my sister, was born, I'm afraid my mother transferred all her affection to her. From that moment on," he shrugged, "she got everything and I got nothing."

"Do you still see your mother often? How frequently do you go to your mother's house?"

At this Julius Wolfe's face darkened some more, and his knuckles went white as he gripped the edge of the desk. "I never go to her apartment. I am banned from ever setting foot over her threshold, and even if I weren't, I couldn't bring myself to go back."

"Why is that?"

Wolfe looked as if he were not going to answer, but suddenly the

tension drained out of him and he collapsed back into his chair. It creaked slightly.

"What does it matter? You could find out from Mother, I suppose. If you must know, it is because of my wife."

"Your wife?"

"Yes. I married a woman my mother hated. She warned me that if I married Bunny she would never meet her socially or privately and that neither of us would ever again be welcome in her home. I married Bunny anyway and Mother kept her promise."

"And you have never set foot in the place since?"

"And never will again. Now, if there is nothing more, I have some work to do, so if you will please excuse me?"

"Yes, yes, of course," said the professor coming to his feet. "And thank you for everything."

We left, but in the outer office the professor did a strange thing. He had walked over to the secretary and was about to speak to her when he suddenly collapsed across her desk. We both rushed to try to help him, and for a moment there was considerable confusion as he jerked and scrambled on top of the desk, scattering papers and paraphernalia over the floor.

"Are you all right?" I asked him nervously when we got him upright again.

"Fine, fine, just a momentary aberration of this old heart," he coughed, thumping his sternum with a fist. "No, no, don't trouble yourself," he said to the worried suggestions the secretary was making about doctors. "Fine now. Come on, my young colleague, we have wasted enough of these good people's time."

Outside the office the professor looked for and found a men's room. I thought he was in need of water, but once inside he stripped off his coat with a chuckle and went down on his knees again. From a pocket he took a bunch of keys and a small camera with a flash; he proceeded to take individual photos of each key on the chain. He hushed my cries of amazement by telling me to guard the door and see that we were not interrupted, and then he continued making his unusual portraits.

When he was done, he packed away the camera, put his coat back on, and asked me to see if the coast was clear. It was. The professor stopped by the women's room next door, looked through the keys on the bunch, and inserted one of them into the lock. I thought he was about to enter,

but with a second chuckle he left the keys dangling there and we hurriedly left the building.

"You have an automobile, have you not?" he asked in the cab back to the college. "Meet me tomorrow night at my lodgings, and I will explain everything."

That Saturday was not my best day. I usually visited my mother and enjoyed her company, but on that particular Saturday time dragged. I couldn't get my mind off Wodeash's crazy behavior and what he might have planned for the evening. So it was with some relief that I picked him up as promised and we rattled on our way in my old VW.

"Where to?" I asked.

"The offices of son Julius," I was told, and nearly swerved to hit a lamp post. The professor smiled at my surprise.

"But it will be closed. No one will be there," I protested.

"I am counting on it," replied the professor. Then he went on: "You know, in ninety-five percent of all break-ins the burglar is never caught. Of the few who are arrested, almost none ever goes to jail; in terms of the odds there is more profit and less risk in stealing from others than in trying to earn an honest living."

My blood ran cold. "We are going to break into Julius's office?" I breathed, not wanting to believe it.

"Not exactly break in," soothed the professor. "I have some keys that will let us in without causing damage, so our visit should remain undetected."

"How did you do that?"

"Easy; when I pretended to collapse on that secretary's desk I lifted the office keys from her desk drawer. You would be surprised at how many people keep a set of all their keys in those little compartments at the front of their desks. Then, in the men's room, as you know, I photographed each key. Today I spent several hours working from those photos to produce a duplicate set of keys. My method is much better than that old technique so beloved of spy movies where the key is pushed into soft wax. Very old fashioned. As we left I put the keys into the lock of the women's room where the little secretary would find them and think she had left them there on her last visit. Most women's rooms are locked these days; you can't trust anyone. Easy!"

Easy, yes, if you were a crazy professor. But he hushed me into silence and wouldn't tell me what he wanted in Wolfe's office. "I don't know

myself yet," was all he would say.

I parked at a meter and was feeling so paranoid I put money into it even though it was long after hours. The professor's keys let us into the building and into Julius's office with no trouble, and I stood shivering by the door as, with the aid of a flashlight, he began a systematic search of the files and desk drawers. He laughed when he saw the original set of office keys back in its place in the secretary's cubbyhole.

"She found them," he grinned.

One by one he examined all the business papers in the outer office, then went into Julius's inner sanctum. "Not exactly a ball of fire, son Julius," he commented, running his finger down an account ledger. "In fact, he is only just making a living, even with his mother's help. Ah! Here is one item I was looking for."

He pointed to a recent entry. "That store we saw for rent yesterday was indeed already let to the angry tenant who couldn't get in."

"Is that significant?" I asked, teeth chattering.

"Very. But not as significant as this." He had put down the big ledger and picked up a smaller volume bound in red leather that had been hidden in the back of Julius's desk. I looked over his shoulder and read in the circle of light a series of entries amounting to a considerable sum. I whistled.

"Yes, very significant," murmured the professor. "This answers the final question. Look at the name of the debtor." I looked and suddenly felt very sad for poor, rich, lonely Mrs. Printer-Wolfe.

Sunday it rained and I watched football on TV. Monday I had two classes to teach, one in cell biology, my specialty, and a second in the afternoon on the subject of experiments in microbial genetics, about which the department chairman insists I know more than anyone else on the faculty. I was also the most junior so I could not say no.

Our burglary had gone undetected, as the professor had predicted. We had taken away nothing but the knowledge that another, more serious, crime was being planned and that this time the victim would not be as lucky. I was all for informing the police and turning the whole matter over to them, but the professor argued against this course of action. He pointed out that we had little hard proof. Rat noises, empty stores, and illegal burglary would not stand up in court; also it was a family matter and Mrs. Printer-Wolfe should be given the option of settling the matter with her offspring without the need for lawyers.

So, reluctantly, I agreed to provide transportation and my physical presence again on Tuesday evening when the professor assured me we would catch the thief red-handed. Wodeash had, he said, some preparations to make, so I did not see him until dinnertime. We had a gooey, rubbery hamburger together and several cups of coffee in the college cafeteria before once again setting out in my VW.

This time we parked at the far end of the commercial street that ran behind Mrs. Printer-Wolfe's house and settled down to watch. The professor had provided a thermos of hot soup and a book on Mayan religious artifacts which he read by the light of an orange street lamp.

At ten o'clock he snapped the book shut and closed the thermos, and we eased ourselves out of the cramped seats.

"No noise, and no violence," he cautioned me for the dozenth time. "You don't know your strength sometimes."

And you don't know my constitutional cowardice, I thought to myself as we crept along the sidewalk to the other end of the street. The rented/not rented store was still boarded up, and we took our positions in the recessed doorways on either side. It was colder that night than it had been, and I shivered with either fear or frost, I couldn't tell which.

At ten thirty we heard a noise. The professor pressed a finger to his lips as he slipped farther back into the shadows. I tried to make myself as small as possible behind a window full of ladies' undergarments. The door between us creaked open and a head appeared, looking cautiously into the street. Apparently satisfied that all was well, a large man with a cloth-wrapped bundle came out of the boarded up store and turned to lock the door. We moved in unison. The professor jabbed a short section of iron pipe into his ribs and I held my hand threateningly in my pocket, hoping the thief would think I also had a gun.

"Don't move," the professor said dramatically, but the shock of being discovered had made the big man almost jump out of his skin. The professor neatly removed the bundle from under his arm and passed it to me. I unwrapped it and there in the orange glow of the street lights caught my first glimpse of the famous Edmundson Chalice.

"Now then, young man," the professor said, "we need your cooperation. Spend thirty minutes in our company and you can go on your way, no questions asked. All we need is your face. Show it to us."

The big man turned around into the light and I saw it was the tough customer who had prevented the legal tenant from taking over his newly

hired premises.

He agreed; he really had little choice; the professor left the distinct feeling that we were both police detectives. I drove and the professor sat in the back seat with the big man. I heard them talking as the professor explained what he wanted done, but I concentrated on reaching our destination, a large house in a residential district near the park and the center of town.

We left the car on the street and went up a short driveway to the big house. The house was clearly subdivided into smaller residences. On the door was a series of bells, and the professor looked down the list of names in search of the one he wanted. He found the right bell and rang it. A moment later there was a buzz and we pushed the door open. Inside was a warm, carpeted, well kept hallway with several other doors leading off from it. Each door had a number and we stood outside the one labeled 1B. The big man stood facing the door and we pressed ourselves against the wall on either side. Professor Wodeash nodded and the big man knocked on the door.

There were footsteps and a moment later the door swung open. Framed by the light was a young woman, darkhaired and with a figure built for comfort, not for speed. She stared at the man in front of her.

"You fool," she hissed angrily, "why did you come here? Don't you know the old bag is still here with me? Have you got it with you?"

"Yes, we have," said the professor, stepping into view and holding out the chalice. She automatically reached out for it, looking shocked. "I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Miss Sandra Printer-Wolfe, if I am not mistaken?"

Behind her I could see a small apartment, and in the living area, on a flowered sofa, sat the old lady, Mrs. Printer-Wolfe.

"Who is it, dear?" she called out.

"Only your rat, dear lady," replied the professor.

"So it was the daughter," said the dean with amazement in his voice. The three of us, Professor Wodeash, the dean, and I, were sitting in his office drinking small glasses of brandy. The room was filled with the smoke from the professor's pipe, which he had just finished filling and lighting. The dedication ceremony had gone well, and Mrs. Printer-Wolfe had handed over her husband's (now her son's) chalice into the safekeeping of the college, as she had wanted. I had to admit that even son Julius

seemed happier on this occasion. Earlier in the day we had visited him again, this time taking along his mother, and explained what had happened. He wasn't too pleased about having his office broken into, but he calmed down when he heard what his mother had to tell him.

We were now going over the whole story again, this time for the benefit of the dean.

"Sandra Printer-Wolfe was a spoiled brat," said Wodeash, puffing away merrily, looking like a benevolent pixie. "Despite all her parents did for her she turned out rotten. When she began her print shop business all went well at first, but she had no sense of finance and quickly got into trouble stocking expensive but unsaleable works of art. The rent kept coming due and she had no income. At first her mother helped her, but Sandra quickly saw that her independence would be rapidly curtailed if her mother ever found out she was so badly in debt. So she went to the loan sharks and got herself into a second set of troubles."

"She couldn't pay them either?" asked the dean.

"That's right. And they threatened her with bodily harm so she went to her brother for help. Although he didn't like her, she was his sister and he couldn't stand by and see her hurt, so he gave her money. We found his private account book in his office when we searched it." The dean winced as the professor said that, but affecting not to notice, the professor went on. "But now the daughter was beholden to both her mother and her brother. An intolerable situation for a spoilt woman like her. So she planned a crime that would solve all her troubles at once: stealing the Edmundson Chalice.

"It was perfect. The chalice was valuable and everyone knew Julius was the rightful owner, so if it went missing, he would be the prime suspect. Even better, he was the agent for the vacant shop beneath his mother's apartment, and this gave her the second idea. Using an accomplice, the big ugly fellow we met twice, she persuaded him to work every night cutting a hole in the ceiling of the store up into her mother's ballroom. That was the noise the old woman heard and thought was rats. When I examined the area, at her request, I could find no evidence of rat infestation, which is very characteristic, but a lot of evidence of weakened floorboards. That was when I became suspicious."

"But why go to all the trouble of a break-in, why not just walk off with the chalice after one of her visits to her mother?" the dean asked.

"That is where she was very clever," said the professor, disappearing

into an even larger cloud of smoke. "She wanted Julius to get the blame, but Julius was not allowed in his mother's house. He did, however, have every right to be in the store below. If she made it seem like a break-in from that direction, the finger of guilt would be pointing even more strongly at the son."

"I bet they got a nasty shock when the store was rented," I said.

"Indeed so," said the professor. "The renting of the store, and the decision to hand over the chalice to the college, nearly disrupted all their plans. The crime had to be committed as soon as possible. The store's new tenant was prevented from gaining access to his property, and the floor cutting was hurried up by working in the evenings as well as at night. That was when Mrs. Printer-Wolfe noticed the noise and sprang to the wrong conclusions.

"The climax came last night, the latest possible date. Sandra invited her mother round to her own apartment so the chalice would be unguarded. The maid had the evening off, and the accomplice was able to move in. Unfortunately for them both, I had seen the signs of the portending crime; and with the help of my admirable companion we were able to thwart it."

"And you guessed all this from an empty store and some rat noises?" said the dean, shaking his head.

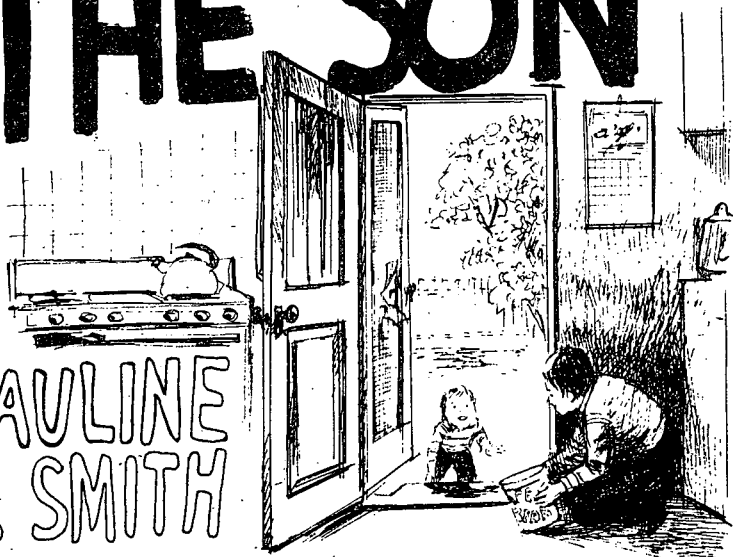
"A good scientist, noble administrator, is an observer and a thinker. I am both. I saw the signs and inferred that trouble was coming. What I did, I did for this fair college and to help an old lady in distress."

The dean made a rude remark and I grinned. So did the professor as he stood up to leave. "The cause of justice has triumphed," he announced. "And, incidentally, Mrs. Printer-Wolfe confessed to me a change of heart at the ceremony today. She has invited her son and his wife to come and visit her as soon as the floor is replaced. She was very impressed with her son's trying to help his sister. The sister has been sent to see the sights of Europe for a few years; perhaps a Frenchman will take a fancy to her. Now, if I could only interest this uncorrupted youth in my blend of Burley, and get him to enjoy the pleasures of the weed, my life would be complete." With that he slapped me heartily on the back and laughed.

Jeffrey knew he wasn't perfect. But he tried to make sure he wasn't going to be as imperfect as he was afraid of being.

THE SON

by
PAULINE
C. SMITH



I, Jeffrey's sister, am the one who will have to tell it because I am the only one who understands. Mother doesn't. Well, Mother doesn't understand anything. She lives in a fog of fear, scurrying around, doing things for Father and Jeffrey. Like Edith Bunker. But she doesn't have Edith's flashes of insight, her occasional strengths.

The police are appalled. Migod, why did he do it? they ask. Well, I know why, but I'm sure my explanation won't make sense to them. That's

because they didn't live with us, sit at the same table each day, hear Father talk about his son's perfection. Jeffrey was all of his dreams, his hopes, his everything.

I understand. I knew Father and Jeffrey with their faces off and their hair down. I watched and I listened. Yet I was not involved because who cared about me or noticed me or knew that I existed—except as a background piece, a part of the room. But I know why Jeffrey did what he did. And it started a long time ago.

It started when he was eight. He got all these things together one day: his bicycle with the flat tire, his baseball and mitt, some marbles, and his erector set and went away with them. So I followed. I was nine. He took all this stuff to a kid's house about four blocks over and came out of the kid's garage with a rifle in his arms. The rifle didn't look like any toy to me. I found out later it wasn't.

He carried the rifle home under his jacket and since Mother was going through her regular scurrying routine, she didn't even notice when he came in the house looking a little bulky. I didn't say anything to him about the rifle. He didn't know I knew he had it.

He went down to the wash with that rifle under his jacket and practiced down there. He'd aim and shoot and aim and shoot until he finally got so good he could kill a rabbit if it stood still long enough and a bird that was perched on a branch. I hid behind some trees and cried, hating him for what he was doing but afraid to say anything about it to anyone.

We weren't a close family in our house. I mean, Father wasn't close even to Jeffrey even though Jeffrey was so important to him. He never knew all that stuff was gone—the bike, ball, mitt, marbles, and the erector set. He never played with him like some fathers play with their sons. None of us ever played together or talked together or did anything together. Father just talked *at* Jeffrey. "That's my perfect son," he'd say proudly. It made me gag. I think it put Jeffrey a little on the gag fringe, too, although in a different way. He knew he wasn't all that much and never could be, and it scared him.

It wasn't until he was ten that I knew why he'd got the rifle. By then, he'd built a covered-up place in a tree down in the wash to hide it so he wouldn't always have to wear his jacket and so he could keep it out of the house. Not that Mother would have snitched on him even if he had it stuck in plain sight in a corner of his room. No, she'd have scurried off

for a dust cloth to shine it up, never thinking what it was or what it might be used for.

I wasn't following him as much as I used to. I couldn't stand seeing those rabbits and birds killed. Anyway, this new girl, Linda, had moved to the neighborhood and I was over at her house most of the time.

The first pet killed was the Simmonses' Siamese cat, then the Donahue Peke, and finally the Great Dane that took a while to die because he was bigger than the rest. Neighbors wrote Letters to the Editor about what was the world coming to when a dog wasn't safe even behind his own fence? The police made a door-to-door canvass to find out if anybody knew anything. I knew something. I knew Jeffrey killed those animals. And I knew why. He was practicing. He was getting ready to kill Father.

It may sound far-out to you that because Jeffrey killed helpless little wild things in the wash and then started killing the pets of the neighborhood it meant he was out to get Father. But then you didn't sit at our table and live in our house all those ten years of Jeffrey's life and listen night after night to Father talking about his perfect son, and how much he expected from him.

I caught an expression on Jeffrey's face once when no one was looking. He HATED Father. So that's why Jeffrey got the rifle to practice shooting so he could shoot Father, and he was getting a little closer to it when he came up out of the wash and started killing the animals around the neighborhood. He was just working toward his final goal. But with the police prowling around and the neighbors up in arms, he either got cold feet or else he decided to put it off for a while.

He put it off too long because, when he was fifteen, he was picked up for stealing a handgun. They didn't actually find him in the pawnshop with the broken window, they found him a couple of blocks away. And they didn't actually find the handgun on him, they found it in the gutter where they think he threw it.

He never said he did it. He couldn't, not with Father standing by talking about his son's being railroaded. I wasn't there at Juvenile Hall after they picked him up and called the folks, but I can imagine it—Father telling the officers what a perfect son he was and Mother, looking scared, fluttering her hands over Jeffrey and Father, but not too close, not quite close enough to touch. And Jeffrey, I can imagine him too, all upset without showing it because his plan hadn't worked, the plan to steal a handgun because a handgun would be more certain to kill Father than

that little old .22 rifle that took a while to kill a Great Dane. They sent Jeffrey off to a maximum security boys' camp, located out in the country about thirty-five miles away.

I spent more and more time over at Linda's (thank goodness she and her family didn't blame me for the sins of my brother). I studied with her. I was sixteen and already a junior in high school, a very good student but nobody ever called me perfect, for which I thank heaven. And every Saturday, without fail, Mother and Father would drive out to this boys' camp to visit Jeffrey.

I always spent Saturday with Linda and since Father and Mother didn't get home until late, I usually stayed all night.

It was one of these Saturdays that Jeffrey changed his plans and did the thing the police can't understand. I learned of their Saturday pattern only through an occasional dropped word. As I say, we were not a family of talkers among ourselves. What I learned was that they generally arrived at the camp about ten in the morning. Then sometimes they had to wait because Jeffrey had some duty to perform—I don't know what, maybe clean up his cell, maybe split rocks. Anyway, they often didn't get away from the camp until eleven, eleven thirty, at which time they went off to lunch. Different places, different towns. Sometimes they came back to a restaurant here. I don't know if they ever brought him home or not; that's one reason I spent the day with Linda. I didn't want to be home if they brought Jeffrey there. Well, so then they had dinner somewhere and had to get him back to camp by seven. But they could still stay and visit until nine. I often wondered what they talked about; these people who never talked. Maybe they didn't talk at all, maybe they just sat and ate and drove and rode and sat and ate some more.

Jeffrey broke the Saturday pattern. I could have told them he would. I could have said Jeffrey had something on his mind that he'd had on it since he was eight years old and somehow, some way, he'd carry out that thing on his mind. But I didn't tell them, and if I had, they would not have understood.

As well as I can figure it out, they all left the camp—Father, Mother and Jeffrey—at about eleven o'clock, and if I know Jeffrey, and, believe me, I know Jeffrey, he had his plans made for the day. So they got changed; after all, he wasn't perfect. Anyway, he fixed the day at the beginning the way he wanted it. I mean, he must have suggested where they go to eat lunch; after all, they had eaten in a lot of different places

and he'd know the one best suited, wouldn't he? So he chose.

We live on the north side of the city and my aunt and uncle, with their little boy, live on the east side. My uncle is my father's younger brother but we never see them. Anyway, that's where they live and I think Jeffrey had it all planned to go there and do, not what he did, but almost what he did. My uncle works on Saturday. He's got a shift on his job where he gets Thursdays and Fridays off, not Saturdays and Sundays like everybody else.

So that Saturday, Jeffrey opted for Eaton's restaurant, just east of the city limits where the parking lot is out in back and you can walk in through the back door and the men's room is off the back hall, and they keep the lighting strictly down to a minimum so that it's nighttime at noon and you have to peer at the menu through muted light. Father parked the car, and they walked through the back door, down the hall, and into the intimate darkness of the restaurant part. Mother giggled nervously and cleared her throat and fluttered over the menu and Father asked Jeffrey what he would have. Jeffrey said he didn't know, he was pretty hungry though. "Why don't you order for me, Father? While I go to the men's room."

Off he went. Down the back hall, past the men's room, out into the sunshine. He blinked a minute before his eyes adjusted, then raced across the parking lot to the car which he hot-wired (having learned how at the boys' camp). And before Father could even begin to wonder why he was taking so long, he was a mile away, driving toward our uncle's house that we'd only been in maybe once or twice, since the families had never been friendly.

He had it all planned in his mind. The aunt would be home alone with the little boy, and the whole thing would go off like a rifle shot in the wash. That's what Jeffrey probably thought while driving, but it didn't work out that way. It worked out differently. With the same results, however, as far as Jeffrey was concerned.

He parked the car around the corner from that shaded street on that warm early afternoon, cut through lawns, and found the note pinned to the screen on the half-windowed back door that told whoever it was written to that his aunt would be home by one thirty. Okay, he thought, he'd go in and wait. He tore off the note, crumpled it up and put it in his pocket, pushed his fist through the screen, reached down, unlocked the door, and let himself in.

He casually straightened the ragged corner of the screen and wandered through the house, picking things up here and there and turning them over in his hands. He ran upstairs, opening medicine cabinets in each of the bathrooms, standing for a while in the master bedroom to gaze at the picture of a little boy, his cousin, about three or four years old, then investigating the guest room, which didn't have anything particularly interesting in it, and finally entering the nursery. He knew it was the nursery because of the animal wallpaper and the crib. He looked out the window down upon the back yard that had a swing and some playground stuff in it.

It was a quarter of one, reminding him that he was hungry. So he went downstairs to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door on what seemed to be mostly uncooked food, such as raw meat and vegetables in the crisper. He pressed his foot on the freezer compartment pedal and found a gallon of ice cream, and at that moment he heard the child.

He whirled and tiptoed to the half-windowed back door, standing at one side, and saw that this child in the back yard was younger than the one in the picture upstairs, with light hair instead of dark, but he seemed to know his way around the yard as he prattled to himself without truly sounding out the words.

Jeffrey opened the back door and squatted on the doorsill. "Hey," he called softly. The child turned and smiled. "Want some ice cream?"

The child ran toward him, tottering in his haste, and scrambled up the back steps. He couldn't have been more than two, two and a half, a sunny child. . . . Jeffrey thought of him that way, as being sunny, bright, eager—he bet *he* was like that once—it's how he *wanted* to be. Not the perfect son, just a happy boy. He picked the child up and set him on the kitchen table and spooned some ice cream into a saucer, forgetting to eat any himself as he watched the child dig in and smear as much on his face as he got inside his mouth.

Jeffrey realized it was now after one o'clock and he got busy.

Leaving the carton of ice cream out on the counter to melt and the freezer open, he snatched up the child in his arms, muttering something about "having things to do," and carried him upstairs.

The child had begun to whimper by the time Jeffrey reached the nursery. He had dropped him in the crib and placed a pillow on his face when he heard, through the open window, a woman's voice down in the back yard. "Bobby," he heard the woman call. "Bobby, I know you're over

here somewhere."

He heard a knock at the back door and the sound of a rattling doorknob. . . .

The child had ceased to struggle. Jeffrey lifted the pillow and looked down into his face.

"Bobby," he heard from the back yard. Then another voice, and Bobby's mother in answer: "I put him down for his nap. He must have gotten out without my knowing. He always comes over here. I always find him here. . . ."

Jeffrey placed the pillow on the child's face and pressed for a little while longer, just in case.

The voices still sounded in the back yard, rising in alarm.

He picked up the pillow again, assured himself the child was dead, let the pillow drop back on the still little face, and hurried downstairs. He couldn't go out the back way and cut through lawns to the car around the corner—those women would be running all over the back yards. He peeked out the front window onto a quiet street, let himself out, ran to the sidewalk, then moved at a more leisurely pace around the corner, hot-wired the car, and drove off.

He felt good.

He felt as if his had been a Mission Accomplished. Not as he had planned, but close enough. Close enough for his purpose.

As he drove off he saw, in his rear view mirror, a young woman run between the houses, search the street with frantic eyes, and call out. He couldn't hear what she called because, by then, he was too far off, but he was sure she called, "Bobby."

He checked the gas gauge, reasoned he could get out of town and fifty miles away before he ran out. Then he'd just hot-wire another car and continue. Which he did.

The authorities caught up with him two states away, and everyone asked: "Why a baby? Why a baby he didn't even know? Why would he do a thing like that?"

Well, it is really quite simple. Since he couldn't kill Father, who'd driven him crazy with his "perfect son" bit, he planned to do the next best thing: kill himself as a little child, knowing how imperfectly he would grow up. That's why he planned it for our cousin, our uncle's son, related to Father. Then the neighborhood child came along and Jeffrey settled for him—any child was a symbol—because he needed to kill himself

before he became imperfect enough to kill Father.

They will try him in an adult court even though he's not quite sixteen. One of the psychiatrists who examined him said they'd better put him in the slammer and close the door tight and never let him out in society again. Another said that this is one of the times to invoke the death penalty. Well, they won't do either. You just wait and see.

They'll give him a something-to-life sentence and then let him out in seven, eight, maybe ten years and parole him to the folks . . . and there he'll be—in perfect aiming position and Father will be the target.

No one understands what Jeffrey is and what he will become and no one understands what Father was and what he won't be. But I do. And the minute I'm out of high school, I'm getting out of here—far, far away where I'll be out of the line of fire when Jeffrey gets out and comes home.

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The storm that night kept nearly everyone indoors. No one was around to see who shot Harry Bagley. The thunder masked the sound, and the lightning illumined only his dead face.

STORM OVER LONGVALLEY



by **J. CALLOW**

"I'm finding it hard to understand how Harry Bagley could have been killed, in full view of your market, without anybody seeing or hearing anything." Chief Constable Leonard Hurley stood at our upstairs apartment window, his powerful blue eyes critically examining the vacant lot almost opposite, lit now by a full moon sailing free of the storm clouds. "Emma, from this window there's a clear view all over that lot where the old house used to be. You say some of you looked out here at about the

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time we're interested in. Right past the front of your place Bagley would have gone, and possibly whoever killed him. Nobody here—folks coming and going in the market downstairs, you folks looking out this window—nobody sees or hears a thing?"

"It's bright moonlight now, chief. When we looked out before, the storm was at its worst. A black night. Rain coming down in sheets. A blackout it was out there, except when lightning was flashing. I could barely see to the middle of the street after that rain got going. Didn't see a single soul."

"It's Friday night, Earl." The chief turned to where my husband sat, a bit dazed to be sure, on the couch. "Open till ten. Friday night, one of your busiest; people in and out right up to your closing time." He sounded reproachful. "Let me have the names, Earl, of who was in your place, either coming or just leaving at about—say from nine o'clock on."

They went at it together. When I came back with a cup of coffee for the chief, he was closing his notebook. Earl was saying: "Thunder rumbling, real bad lightning from nine on. People who hadn't shopped by then were putting it off to Saturday. Ron and I had all the produce brought in from the front by nine. After the storm hit at around nine thirty there wasn't a soul. I let Ron go at nine twenty-five. Polly went upstairs soon after. Emma, she'd her bridge club here from seven o'clock on. It was the ladies leaving at eleven, short-cutting across the lot, who found him."

Polly Wainwright, a distant cousin of Earl's, has lived with us for five years or more, helping in the market. Ron Blake, he's the high school kid who works for Earl weeknights, weekends, and holidays. I manage the post office downstairs and do the bookkeeping for the shop. Earl and I have operated the grocery market and post office for twenty-four years. Our place is a bit old fashioned in this small town of Longvalley. Even so, we pride ourselves that you can get what you need in our general store. We've a hardware line as well as meats, groceries, and produce that's locally grown. All the country round about Longvalley, fifteen thousand people now, is farmland. Five minutes from the middle of town and you can be in some of the prettiest countryside you'll ever see; three minutes will take you to the river that meanders through the lower part of town. Our Main Street curves to cross the river, becoming at that point South Valley Road. Almost everybody here is known to us, even if some but vaguely, since newcomers, other than tourists, are a rarity.

"A shotgun makes quite a noise," the chief said. He was walking about

the room looking thoughtful. "Your bridge night, Emma. Three tables you say. That means twelve people here who didn't hear anything. Downstairs are Earl, Polly, and Ron, and a customer or two. Nobody sees or hears anything." He eyed us skeptically; he couldn't let it go.

"Who'd hear anything with that thunder crashing about?" Earl said.

The chief was going over again all that we had already told him before he'd had the body removed. He'd asked us all to wait until he came back from viewing the body of Harry Bagley on the vacant lot. We'd watched from the upstairs window, seeing Doc Entwistle moving around in the glare of the chief's headlights.

"The ladies left at around eleven. You three," he turned to where Rose Markam, Mary Possit, and Thelma Lindley, the school teacher, sat. Rose and Mary both work at the bank. Three solid types, understandably now a bit upset. "You three cut across the vacant lot. The others went down Main Street."

"Yes, chief," Thelma said. "Mary, Rose, and I all live on the Terrace, just off Meadow Lane. A short cut. Even though the lot was muddy the concrete drive that belonged to the old house is still there. About halfway over we came on the body sprawled just near those lilac bushes. At first we thought, since it was Harry, that he was drunk. We decided that we'd have to call you so that you could—I mean, we couldn't just ignore his lying there. He was sopping wet. We hesitated whether or not to go back to Earl's place or telephone when we got home. And then we saw his face." She shuddered. "We got back here as fast as we could."

They had come hurrying back, ringing the bell at our downstairs door. Earl had gone down, saying, "Now who's forgot what this time?" They'd gasped out the shocking news.

"Bagley," Earl had said. "He'll be drunk, that's all. Anyway, go on upstairs while I nip over and take a look."

Earl had come back whitefaced, shaking. "That horse he was riding earlier and abusing something shameful has finally finished Bagley off," he said. "Threw him and kicked him in the face." Chief Leonard Hurley had joined us but minutes after Earl had put through a call. Doctor Entwistle, also the coroner, had reported that a shotgun blast, rather than the horse, was responsible for Harry's death.

"How'd you know it was Harry?" the chief asked. "I mean the way his face—"

"I don't know, really," Rose said, hurrying to reply lest the chief be

moved to describe what Harry's face had been reduced to. "Clothes, I suppose. We've been used to seeing him around for a long time. There was no sign of the horse."

"It would head for home once Harry let go of the bridle rein." He took down the names of all who had been at the bridge party and prepared to leave. "If any of you come up with something you forgot to tell me, be sure to get in touch. We'll talk some more later." He headed for the stairway, Earl following to let him out. "Thanks for the coffee, Emma. Good night, Polly. Oh, wait. You ladies will have to take the long way home after all. If you care to come now, I'll drive you over to the Terrace. Don't want anybody going walking over the lot until we've had a good look at it in the daylight."

Thelma, Rose, and Mary accepted the offer with alacrity. And Earl, Polly, and I were left to tidy up. Bed, for the time being, seemed out of the question. "I was tired as all get out when I first came upstairs," Earl said. "Now I doubt if I could get to sleep for thinking about this."

We sat at the kitchen table going over what had happened, trying to come up with answers as to who and why.

"Who'd go to such lengths?" Polly said. "Good for nothing as Harry is—was—folks in Longvalley aren't the vindictive kind. Not that the most of us wouldn't have gladly removed Harry if there'd been some way."

"He wasn't overdone with friends," Earl agreed. He was attacking a plate of leftover sandwiches. "Outside of Nora I can't think of anybody who even moderately tolerated him. Always thought that one day he'd go too far, a beating maybe, but hardly this."

"What about Nora," I said. "She's got to be told."

"The chief was driving out to the farm right after he left us," Earl said. "Nora, she'll be wondering—but no, this isn't the first time that horse has galloped home without Harry, him lying in a ditch until he sobered up enough to walk."

"Why such a sweet person as Nora Fitzmaurice married Bagley is past my understanding," Polly said. "This past year for her must have been hell."

Nora, although Bagley's wife for the past year, was still referred to as Nora Fitzmaurice. Everyone in Longvalley had been astounded when Nora had married Bagley so soon after Charlie Fitzmaurice died.

"Bamboozled into it by that rascal," Earl said. "Trusting little woman, thinking all men were like her dad, or Charlie. That's where she was

wrong."

I sat thinking about Nora. She hadn't been to town much after marrying Harry. About a month ago she'd come into the shop. I'd been shocked at her appearance. Her once shining blonde hair had straggled about her neck in rattailing strands. The cream and roses complexion had looked old. And behind her dark glasses, as she'd raised them briefly, I saw that her lovely blue eyes were sunken and ringed about with purple bruises fading to yellowish grey. I'd mumbled something about why didn't she stay for lunch, as I'd be going upstairs in a matter of minutes. And Earl, tactless as usual, said, "Right, Nora, stay for lunch. Looks to me like you ain't been eating right." She had smiled then, for a brief second looking like the lovely Nora we'd always known.

Her voice hadn't been the same either, low pitched now, and hoarse. And then, as she waited for Earl to box her purchases, she'd said to me, in an intense whisper: "Emma, did you know that Reggie Crossland's back from Australia?" Her voice and manner had taken me by surprise, for a glimpse of the old, vibrant Nora had shone through. It was after she'd gone that I thought about how close she and Reggie had once been. But it was only a momentary thought at the back of my mind.

"These sandwiches are good," Polly was saying. She and Earl, the plate between them, settled into the pleasant task of finishing them.

Nora and Reggie Crossland. Was it eighteen or twenty years ago? Both of them eighteen then. Sweethearts they'd been, crazy about each other, it had been easy to see. And I remembered "crazy" was the word Nora's father had used when he'd put his foot down at their wanting to become engaged. "That crazy Reggie Crossland. I'll not have him for a son-in-law." He'd succeeded in separating them by sending Nora off to nursing school. The war coming right about then had helped, I suppose, for Reggie was among the first to join up.

"I'll wait," Nora had told me, grimly. "We'll marry, Emma, you just wait and see. But I'm not going to sit about mooning in my father's house. He doesn't really want me to go away to be a nurse. But it's what I'm going to be. Then when Reggie comes back and becomes a teacher, I'll have a profession, too."

Nora was not only very beautiful, she was spunky as well. I could see why Reggie was so taken. Sure, he loved to look at her, who wouldn't? But it was a sort of lively fire she had that made her especially attractive. As for Reggie's becoming a teacher, which his dad, Lionel Crossland,

was, that was not at all what Reggie had in mind. He'd be a vet, he said, or a farmer. And that was where he ran afoul of his father, a clash of strong wills.

Lionel Crossland was the best school principal Longvalley has ever had, a rather fierce looking, redhaired man immaculately turned out. Red hair brilliantined, mustache waxed, and so neat. Grey suits ranging from charcoal shade to lightest grey, with a bandbox look. Mattie and Lionel Crossland had had their troubles with Reggie. Not that the boy was bad; far from it. It was the fights he got into mostly, and being hauled off to the police constabulary for a talking to by the chief. They found it degrading. At least Lionel did. Mattie Crossland had a more philosophical attitude. Except for the red hair Reggie took after Mattie, both of them having a lovely sense of humor. You couldn't blame Lionel, really, for he did have a standard to maintain in the school. His shining red face seemed to get redder after every one of Reggie's escapades.

Reggie, both Earl and I liked him a lot; he was our box boy at the time he and Nora were going to high school and right up to the time he left for the war. A goodnatured, curly-haired redheaded young giant he was. Forget-me-not blue eyes twinkled with the devil's own mischief. His flashing grin was, he said, "To show my beautiful false teeth. Something I have to do for my old man. All that orthodontal work he paid for. I sure wouldn't have had them if it hadn't been for my father. He wanted me perfect, you see." Of course they were no more false teeth than were Nora's gleaming white ones that made her smile something to see. Three boys we'd had need of to do the work after Reggie went away.

But Reggie could get into trouble without even trying, for he was a bit wild, that is, by some people's standards. There was the motor bike he bought. Tearing about town with that thing banging and roaring all hours of the night—Nora riding pillion, of course—didn't do a thing for his popularity. Then there were the fights; but every incident was the outcome of one of Reggie's good deeds: restraining a wife or dog beater, quite aggressively in some cases, for Reggie never had assessed his own strength; sailing into a group of rowdies tormenting a girl. There were the many pranks, too, some with disastrous results. "That Reggie Crossland fighting again," you'd hear. The constable going for Reggie, seldom for the provocative source. Reggie suffering further in the inevitable row with his father.

When the bike folded, literally, on impact with a tree as Reggie pushed

it to ninety on a stretch of open highway, miraculously with but minor damage to himself, he put fifty dollars of his hard earned money into an old jalopy, which, with the aid of stalwart friends, he parked in our back yard and in off hours took completely apart. "We can be thankful," Earl said, staring at the wreckage strewn about the yard, "that he'll not injure himself or anyone else driving that. For never is he going to get that lot together again."

But in a short time Reggie had it chugging rhythmically and, after equipping it with a Klaxon horn, he drove all hours of the night through the quiet town. Two A.M. he'd chug past our front, the Klaxon tootling, "Pom-pom-poom-pah." I'd turn over in bed and laugh. Earl, he'd sit up and yell: "I'll fire that kid first thing in the morning." He never did, for if there was one person who loved Reggie—that is, apart from his parents, yes, both of them, and Nora—it was Earl.

Then came Hitler, and the war. And Reggie went "over there." The atmosphere of Longvalley changed overnight: our town was suddenly a peaceful place, and sad. Only then did many recall the helpful hand of Reggie Crossland in day to day affairs. Along with Nora, Earl and I wept.

The jalopy stood forlorn in our back yard, for Lionel Crossland wouldn't allow it on their premises. Once in a while I went out and sat in it. Nora came over and sat in it, too. And no doubt wherever Reggie was his ears were burning hot. He wrote long letters to us, telling us how to run the market. "He'll be putting the generals straight as to how that war will best be won," Earl said. He'd met an Australian fellow, Reggie said: "A real guy. Arthur Train his name is. He's a lot like me. When this war's over I'm going sheep farming with him in Australia. My dad won't like it, but then I've always told him I'll never, never be a teacher. I think he'll not mind too much if I make lots of money, which Arthur and I surely will."

Earl laughed. "Two of 'em, mind you, Em, over there cooking up the mischief. War's good as over right now. That Hitler feller might just as well pack it up."

The war over, Reggie did not come back. Nor did he come to very much harm. He and the Australian went sheep farming together in Australia. "Wait for me," he wrote Nora. "I shall have enough money soon to set up my own farm back there." But Nora, a nurse by then, hearing that Reggie had no intention of coming back for three years, feeling sure that someone else had claimed him, did not wait. Her father saw to that.

She married Charlie Fitzmaurice. And ten years went by, happily as it turned out, for Nora.

After completing her nursing course, Nora had worked in a hospital for a short while, then had come back to Longvalley. Her first private case being the care of Mrs. Fitzmaurice, Charlie's mother, she ailing for some time. The Fitzmaurice farm is about a mile outside town along the North Road; its pastures and meadow lands run to the wide river at the foot of the town.

Mrs. Fitzmaurice had taken to Nora from the start. As for Charlie, he'd fallen in love with her right away. They were married that fall, he fifteen years older than she. It was Nora herself who told me: "Emma, he's a kind and wonderful man. I truly love him. It's impossible not to. If you're wondering about Reggie, well, I've accepted the fact that by now there is someone else for him. Why not? So long as he's happy that's all I should really wish for him." I had thought I detected a wistful note; but perhaps I read into her voice something that was not there, only the vague disappointment in my own mind. And happy we were for Nora, for no better marriage could have been arranged. The Fitzmaurices were well off, and a good, steady family, too. Charlie and Nora had ten very special years, a rare devotion between the two, for there were no children of the union. And a delight and comfort to the old lady Nora had been, those two years before she died.

Then Charlie Fitzmaurice had a heart attack, leaving Nora floundering, alone on the farm except for Rory O'Brien, the hired man. We'd had no real knowledge of the lonely grief that Nora endured, she with no way to fill the void, for she and Charlie had come upon that kind of peace together that few people find. So Nora had married Bagley thinking, mistakenly, that for her he'd changed his ways; that the two of them could aid each other, for Harry had straightened himself out surprisingly for six consecutive months. A good looking fellow, no doubt about that, and but three years older than Nora. And he could turn on the charm when he'd a mind to. Sneaky Harry was past master at that. Making a play for Nora, knowing her loneliness, he'd been available constantly in a useful capacity on the farm, impressing her as he meant to. It was all greed on his part, for he was bent on securing the Fitzmaurice farm and any fortune that Charlie had left. We all knew that what Charlie and his mother had was considerable. And Nora no longer had her dad to advise her.

Nora married him in spite of pleas and warnings. And almost at once

found out what that rascal was after. Rory told in town about the beatings when Nora refused him the money he demanded, about the liquor he had hid in the barn. Prize stock Harry sold without Nora's knowledge, as well as fine and valuable antiques from the house. A heartbreaking year she had endured with him.

If only Charlie Fitzmaurice hadn't died! If only Reggie hadn't gone away. If only—no, not a bit of use wishing. But this past year has been a sad one in Longvalley, for we're not indifferent to the suffering of neighbors and friends. And one could hardly think of Charlie without thinking also of George Banner. George with but months to live, dying of cancer, Charlie's lifelong friend, and our vet for years. The best in his work, and a fine, kind man besides. And all along there was wastrel Harry Bagley flourishing like the green bay tree. I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said that, to a man, the people of our community would have wasted no time, had it been possible, in reversing roles for George and Harry. Outspoken they were on the subject, thinking of George.

Rachel Banner's farm is across the river from the Fitzmaurice place, the two farms backing on each other. The Fitzmaurice place fronts on North Road, the Banner farm faces South Valley Road. We never think of one without the other, for Charlie Fitzmaurice and George Banner grew up together, close friends since they played together as boys. Rachel Banner had farmed her place for years with her son George, he also having had the veterinary practice for a good number of years. The terrible thing happening to George took us back to what his mother had been through. Widowed young, with three children to raise, faced with the prospect of losing the farm, Rachel had battled on with only the help of a youthful hired hand, and eventually what her own two boys could do. The farm prospered, but when trouble should have been letting up, Rachel's younger son Alvin ran away after getting Elsie Parker into trouble. Elsie's parents, overly religious, and poor, put Elsie out of their home with no place to go. It had been Rachel who took Elsie in and cared for her and the baby. Then, Rachel's own daughter, Penny, had an affair with a married man, causing the breakup of his marriage. The two of them had left Longvalley. Elsie's eventual departure with the child, a boy she'd called Hiram, was a new grief for Rachel, so attached had she become to both.

"I have to let them go; of course," Rachel said. "Elsie's marrying a good man." He was a butcher in a town some distance away. I don't recall

how Elsie met him, but I think he'd come to the farm buying spring lambs on different occasions. The years set Rachel and Elsie apart, but Christmas always brought a letter and pictures showing how well Hiram was doing with his new brothers and sisters. Still, it was in George that Rachel felt vindicated, he compensating for the way Alvin and Penny had turned out. (But for all that she'd have welcomed them back without reservations.)

The amazing thing was that now Harry was dead and George was up and at work, still enjoying his evening horseback rides about the farm. No taking to bed for him. George's surprising resilience was bolstered, of course, by Rachel's good care of him; she gained time for him. If George had a passion for any one thing it was horses. For years he had bred and raised them. To see George seated on one of his fine animals was to see man and beast at their best together. A joy it was, like the best poetry. Try as I might I couldn't banish the sensation of awe that the mood of the community had been taken note of by a higher authority.

Even so, the one really good thing of the year, for I knew; of course, that we wouldn't have George for long, was that Reggie Crossland came back from Australia. And now he was in the throes of setting up his own sheep farm where the rocky ridges slope up gradually from the valley to Stoney Mountain.

The last crumb cleaned off the plate of sandwiches between them, Earl and Polly decided it was time for bed. "Busy day tomorrow," Earl said. Turning into her room Polly said: "They come in threes, you know, deaths." I've often thought that if any one person typified the mood of Longvalley it was Polly. On that sepulchral note we sought sleep.

The news that Nora was being accused of shooting her husband hit us Saturday morning. Beamer Ross was doing the broadcasting in our market, because that's where he knew he'd find the crowd. And crowd it was, since those who'd been homebound Friday night because of the storm were there with the usual Saturday shoppers. Earl, Polly, and Ron were busy. I helped when no one needed post office business. I close the post office at noon Saturdays.

"I seen her right there at the back of the hotel parking lot, among the trees," Beamer said. "She'd the gun smoking in her hand. And Harry was there laying shot, dead on the ground. I'd had to come out to—well, I'd had quite a few beers. Tom had bounced Harry a few minutes before.

A right nasty mood Harry was in. Just starting to rain it was, thundering and lightening something fierce."

"Mind your big mouth, Beamer," Earl said. "Harry wasn't shot on the hotel parking lot. Across the street from here on the vacant lot is where it happened. You told the chief this tale about the parking lot?"

"Damn right I told him. Down there he is right now checking things out. Across here on the vacant lot, you say. No way. Plain as day I see Nora back in them trees at the hotel parking lot. There's a flash and I see Harry go down, see him lying there on the ground. The horse, he'd a holt of it by the bridle rein. He'd been trying to mount, but that horse it kept on jumping sideways because Harry'd up with his foot to it. A right nasty mood he was in, which was why Tom had had to bounce him."

"And you ran over to put him up on the horse, I suppose?" Polly gritted. "Shot dead like he was. And the horse galloped up here and threw him on the vacant lot across the street."

"Not me! I runs back into the bar to tell the lads what's happened. They come out with me to see. And that's what I don't understand." Beamer looked about wildly. "Harry ain't there. Him and the horse is both gone. I tell you, last night some devilish power was let loose. And somebody tell me, who else'd have reason for murdering Harry?"

"Beamer, last night you'd had a few too many, that's all," Ray Marston, a worker at the lumber mill, said. "Couldn't mount, you say. So right he couldn't. Me and my wife saw him and the horse come out of the hotel parking lot. Going up Main Street Harry was at about nine thirty, just as the rain started. We'd been visiting Amy's folks. All the way up Main Street Harry is trying to mount, hanging onto that poor horse, yelling and scaring it, it prancing sideways. Time and again he fell down, but hung onto the bridle rein. I'd a bit of a job to start my car, and when I finally got in I took a look up the street to see how Harry was making out. He was about level here with Earl and Emma's place, still not mounted. 'That horse'll walk him home,' I says to Amy, 'when it ain't dragging him.' We drove off going south. And that's the last we saw of him."

Jack Stevens, a farmer, told the same story, as did Reed Scott, a plumber who lives at the north end of town. In both cases the time they quoted was "nine thirtyish," just as it was coming on to rain. "Hurrying to get home before the worst of the storm hit," Reed said. "Yep, I passed Harry and the horse, them heading north on Main Street."

So that no one gave much credence to Beamer's story, not even the chief, he well aware of Beamer's tendency to the fabrication of wild tales. But, of course, he had had to check Beamer's story out. Heavy rain had washed the sandy soil along the down slope of the hotel parking lot, obliterating any footprints. If shotgun shells had been ejected, they were nowhere to be found. Furthermore, three men who had been in the bar at the time Beamer had rushed back in testified that they had gone out to see. There had been no sign of Harry or the horse, nor had any of them seen anyone in the trees at the back of the parking lot. The story that Beamer had told them, they said, was that the horse had reared and knocked Harry to the ground, finishing him off right there. Only when the news reported Harry dead by shotgun blast did Beamer say that he had seen Nora with the gun. But he did stick to his story of seeing Nora at the back of the parking lot among the trees, not far from the river.

"Just to get noticed that guy will tell a tale like that," Earl said.

Various rumors flew about all of that Saturday, Sunday too. And then came Nora's admitting to having been at the back of the parking lot at the time in question. "I was there," she said. "But I did not kill Harry. I'd gone to get my horse when the thunder and lightning broke. I knew that Harry would have her tied to a tree. She'd panic. I couldn't stand it, just sitting there knowing the way he treated that fine mare. I'd begged him not to ride her. He did it just to spite me. I ran by the river path, both going there and coming home. Yes, I have a shotgun, a double barrelled one that used to belong to Charlie. Right now I don't know where it is. I did not have it when I went to the hotel parking lot. I saw Harry and the mare leave the lot and turn north onto Main Street."

Whether Chief Hurley believed what Nora told him we didn't know. Nora didn't know either, for she herself, coming in for groceries, told us about that. I have to say that she looked a totally different Nora from the one I'd seen a few weeks back: stronger and more confident, very thin and drawn it's true, but with eyes sort of fierce, and mouth grim. Yet who else but Nora could possibly have a motive for killing Harry? I didn't say that to anybody, but I knew that Earl was thinking the same thing when he said, coming back from taking the groceries out to her truck, "A miracle she'll need to get clear of this mess."

I'd offered to stay nights with Nora. She'd thanked me and said: "I'm okay, Emma, better able now to think than I've been for months."

Nora's story was that she had been in the kitchen when she heard the

horse come galloping into the yard. The bridle rein was hanging in front of it and the riding saddle had slipped a little sideways. Because Rory, the hired man, was off for the evening, she had put the horse in the stable and had rubbed it down. It was her own mare that Charlie Fitzmaurice had given her for an anniversary present, a fine mare that Charlie's friend George Banner had bred and raised.

"Didn't you worry about where your husband might be, Nora?" the chief had asked.

"I'd no doubt as to where he'd be, Chief Hurley," Nora said. "He'd be walking home, or trying to, anyway. And I knew that when he did get home there'd be a beating for me. I hoped that the rain would help sober him up. He was drunk even before he set off for the hotel. He'd been buying liquor and keeping it hid in the barn. He was more violent tonight than he's ever been. It was only because he was so smashed and couldn't catch me that I escaped a beating earlier. And because he couldn't beat me he tore up the kitchen and killed my little dog."

When that piece of news filtered through to us I felt truly sick.

"Killed her little dog! Oh, Earl! That was the last gift that Charlie gave her, for her birthday, but months before he died. That sweet little white poodle she called Persha." And for Nora it would have been so much more than the death of her little white dog. Motive? A whole pile of motives was going to have to be sifted through.

"I've a nasty feeling," Earl said, looking grim, "that we're not going to like the outcome."

The chief, stopping by, had told us that some high-ranking detectives were coming to take the case out of his hands. "They'll be talking to you," he said. "Just tell them everything the way you told it to me." I felt cold inside, for Nora. Monday morning Inspector Hardman and Sergeant Wilshire arrived.

And Monday morning it was that Reggie Crossland came from his farm into town. After a visit and lunch with his parents he came into our shop to stock up on groceries, heading then for the farm. Earl had a great many questions about the farm that Reggie was stocking, at present, with sheep.

"First rate place for sheep, Earl," Reggie said. "Oh, yeah, I'll have some dairy cattle by and by; I've some fine lowland pasture. Then I won't have to pay this price for a piece of cheese that some folks are charging. I've but two milking cows as it is."

"Sheep farming, dairy farming! You all alone! You could lose your shirt.

You'd a lot of good ideas when you worked here as a lad; always thought you'd come up with something smart."

"Smartest lad you ever had, Earl. I'm glad to see you took my advice and put wheels on those bins." There was the same roguish grin, the devilish twinkle in the blue eyes. But the red curls now had a considerable sprinkle of grey. Tough muscled he was now, and lean, brown as a nut, too. But there was a hardness also that I had never thought to see in Reggie's eyes.

"Smart-assed you mean," Earl chided. "But yes, best worker I ever had. Not that we aren't pleased with Ron. He's a darn good lad. Now, if you'd said beef cattle—"

And as I attended to customers at the post office I heard them at it just like old times. And then Earl was saying: "You'll find out what a pound of cheese costs before you're much older. But there's something you've not got on that farm that you're going to need."

"What's that?"

"A wife. I'm hoping you've someone in mind, or are you thinking your ma'll go out there to cook for you?"

"Ma? Heck, no. She's got more than enough to do. Give me time, Earl. After all, I'm not long back."

"How much time d'you need? You're middle-aged as it is."

Reggie made a deprecatory noise. "Just coming into my prime."

They went on talking, selecting and packing items into several boxes. There'll be no difficulty about the wife, I thought. Already female eyes were turning Reggie's way. There was an air of maturity about him now that made him even more attractive than the youthful Reggie had been. That morning was the first time Reggie had heard of how Harry Bagley had died. He and Earl turned to that topic.

"That's the night I drove out to my farm. I'd intended coming in then for the groceries but never did get the time. Knew I'd have to come in again anyway. I don't have the phone, or TV. I do have a radio in the truck, but didn't hear any mention on the news. Friday night, yeah, that's the night I ran out of gas in that storm, would you believe it! I'd had a million things to attend to. Knew right well I was low on gas and then clean forgot. Ma had wanted me to stay over, but I'd my two cows needing milking, pigs to feed, hens to shut up so the foxes wouldn't get 'em. And I'd my two dogs closed up in the house."

About an hour after Reggie left the shop, word came that George

Banner had been taken to the hospital following a stroke Friday night. The gloom thickened. In my post office cubbyhole I sat thinking about George. Polly came downstairs, putting her head around my door. "I've put yours and Earl's tea ready upstairs," she said. "I'll buzz if anyone needs the post office or if the shop gets busy." We've a code: one buzz for Earl, two for me or Polly. But Monday is usually our quietest day.

I could see that Polly had been crying, and I remembered that years ago she and George had walked out together. Polly never had said why they split up but I had suspected, well, it was rather more than a suspicion, that George had been in love with Nora. For Nora, it had been only a tentative attraction before she'd gone to care for Mrs. Fitzmaurice. After that there had been Charlie. Polly hadn't been able to continue the association. Strong Polly is, with her own ideas of what's right. They'd stayed good friends. I'd long felt that Polly should have made herself more available socially. She tends not to get noticed, so fine a person. She and some good man are missing out. I put up another prayer for Polly.

Earl and I sat upstairs with our tea. "As Polly says," Earl murmured, a bit shakily, "three times it is."

"George isn't—Doc Entwistle says his vital signs are good, that he'll come out of it. Who else would have held up as George has?"

"The way things are I can't see—" Earl's voice trailed off into a deep sigh. "You know, she could have gone up Meadow Lane, since it runs out of the hotel parking lot, while Harry and the horse went up Main Street. They'd have come face to face at the vacant lot. And if Nora did have the gun like Beamer says, well, from there she could have gone home with the horse and not a soul would see her. Hardman's going to think that."

The chief was talking to Polly when we went downstairs. I thought he seemed, well, different. I couldn't have said why. For a bachelor he keeps himself looking neat.

"Just passing, Emma, Earl." He made to leave. "Oh, my pipe tobacco, Polly."

"Chief's upset?" Earl asked, looking at Polly after the door had closed. "He say anything new?"

"He's not on the murder case, you know." Polly went back to the weighing of sugar into five pound bags. "Dropped in for his pipe tobacco like you saw. Upset, of course, like the rest of us."

I was relieved that Polly, no longer tearful, was her brisk self again. Worth her weight in gold; we would have had a hard time without her.

Inspector Hardman came to visit us that afternoon. A good looking man, in a cold sort of way. Not unpleasant, but his very direct questions demanded clear answers. The chief had briefed him, of course. We watched after he left the shop, saw him drive the short distance up Main Street and turn right onto North Road, going out to the Fitzmaurice farm. Our hearts were lead weighted. He'd not be long finding out the truth of whatever it was that Nora had done.

Rory O'Brien told of seeing the gun as late as Friday morning on its rack above the chest in the Fitzmaurice farmhouse living room. Now it had vanished. Rory recalled the days when he'd seen Charlie Fitzmaurice teaching Nora to use it. "With Harry," Rory said, "it was different. He was scared of firearms. Only thing he'd have been likely to do with it was to sneak it off and sell it."

As the days passed, Beamer's story gained in credibility. A long week we endured, but finally arrived at Friday. And then a third bombshell hit. Inspector Hardman had come into the shop to verify with us some of the things that Nora had told him. He was about to leave when the shop door bell tinkled and in breezed Bill Worsley. Every Friday Bill comes in for a mountain of groceries. The Worsleys are Reggie Crossland's nearest neighbors in the Rocky Mountain area, even though they are miles apart. Annie, Bill's wife, comes into town but once a year. She makes a day of it, visiting her cousin Maude a few streets to the north of us.

Bill, a boisterous sort of guy, but goodnatured for all that, can be heard all over any room without anybody even trying to listen. "I'll leave you Annie's list, Earl," he bellowed. "I'll be back in a couple of hours or so. I've to run out to the lumber mill for some two-by-fours. Some paint and wallpaper I'm to get as well. Annie's telling me I have to do the upstairs rooms over. I never have seen anything like the work she can dredge up for me."

"Seems to me you keep her mighty busy, too, Bill. All them kids you got," Earl said:

Bill's laughter stirred the dust on our top shelves. "I'm a lucky man," he boomed. "My Annie's the best there is. Mind you put in all that stuff she ordered or my name'll be mud. Yours, too. Say, this is a hell of a business over Harry being shot. Who'd have thought that right at the

very time I was driving past this here corner and out past the Fitzmaurice place last Friday night—”

“Bill.” Earl, seeing the inspector’s sudden interest, had hurriedly laid a hand on Bill’s arm. “Bill, I don’t believe you’ve met Inspector Hardman. He’s working on that job right now.”

“No sir, we ain’t met,” Bill said. “Howdy do.” Bill held out a work-roughened spade of a hand, the grip of which the inspector would remember. His bright brown eyes examined Hardman. He was going to have to give Annie full details of this. A real, top-ranking police guy if that smart suit was any guide. Yes, he’d have to tell Annie how he’d shaken the hand of a top-ranking chap from headquarters. A guy who could tell you a thing or two about murders and such.

“Last Friday night, Mr. Worseley, at around nine thirty you drove by that vacant lot out there, and along North Road past the Fitzmaurice farm. Am I right?”

“Well, more like ten o’clock I’d say, for that rain was really beltin’ down. Real late I was, for I’d had considerable trouble with the truck. I’d had a blowout as well as engine trouble, been in the garage for a couple of hours. I’d picked up the groceries here at about eight and then went up to Annie’s cousin’s place for a bite to eat and I had four dozen eggs to take her. She’d given up on me by the time I got there. And then, sitting there gabbing with Maude and Ben, well, it was getting pretty late. ‘Annie’ll kill me,’ I sez. ‘I better hit the road.’ Maude’s kitchen clock said ten. It was pouring like hell when I turned onto the North Road.” Bill did plenty of arm-waving to indicate his itinerary.

“So twice you went by the vacant lot last Friday night,” Hardman said. “Once at around eight o’clock and again at possibly five after ten?”

“I’d say that’s about it.”

“On that North Road, do you recall seeing anyone? Anything unusual?”

Bill scratched his face. “No, can’t say as I can. Not a night that folks would be out if they didn’t have to. Nothin’ unusual except for somebody who’d run out of gas. I stopped to see if he needed help, but he’d just come from a nearby farm with a gallon can and was okay. Just drove on after that. Nothin’ unusual except for me being late like I never was before.”

“The man who had run out of gas, did you know him?”

“Oh, yeah. The teacher’s lad. Reggie Crossland. He’s just bought a farm next to me. He’d been into town on lawyer business and to gab with

his folks, he said, and was headed back to the farm. He'd get his tank filled at the crossroads when he got over to the valley."

"From a farm you said he came with the gallon can of gas. Which farm was that, Mr. Worseley?"

I felt my throat get dry, and shivers ran down my back. Glancing at Earl I saw the consternation on his face. Apart from Earl and me, the inspector and Bill were the only other people in the shop. Polly had gone upstairs to make the ten o'clock tea. The whole atmosphere of the shop was suddenly charged and tense.

"The Fitzmaurice farm," Bill said, blithely. "Nearest one to the road at that point. I was but a mile out of town on the North Road. Their place, it's but a bit back off the road. I could see lights on in the yard."

The doorbell tinkled again as Bill strode out. I felt drained. Earl was leaning heavily against the counter. "Inspector, I did tell the chief about all the customers we'd had last Friday. I'd thought Bill was headed for home when he went out of here at around eight o'clock."

"So had we," the inspector said. "Eight o'clock hadn't seemed to fit in with what we needed. I'd appreciate it if you'd not mention what you just heard."

"Oh, no way," Earl said, not without feeling. "Of course not," I said. My throat had a swollen sensation.

We watched as Inspector Hardman turned his car once again onto the North Road, this time heading for Reggie's farm. "This Friday, too," I said, "we're not going to forget."

That afternoon Reggie Crossland was arrested for the murder of Harry Bagley. The clincher had been Inspector Hardman's finding Nora's shotgun in Reggie's house. In a kitchen cupboard it was, the kitchen being the only room in the house that was furnished in any way, that is, with a stove, a table, and a cot bed. Reggie admitted that the gun was—or had been—Nora's. He had bought it from her, he said, that same night that he went to get the gallon can of gas for his truck. He had need of a shotgun, he said, for the rabbits were overrunning his farm. He drove himself in, Inspector Hardman driving behind Reggie's blue truck. But because Reggie now had many animals needing his care on the farm he was let out at once on bail.

That night, after the shop was closed, Earl, Polly, and I sat talking about Reggie and Nora, about the days when they had been so young and carefree, riding about Longvalley in the old jalopy, tootling the light-

hearted notes on the Klaxon horn.

"Two young people really in love they were," Polly said. "If it hadn't been for that wretched war they'd have married, and none of this would ever have happened. When they met again, the way it once had been for them, it all came back. And Reggie saw what Bagley had done to Nora. He took the gun and went out to find Bagley. That's how it looks to me anyway."

I thought back, and remembered Nora's voice, husky with emotion as she'd said: "Emma, did you know that Reggie Crossland's back?"

I couldn't get to sleep that night, nor could Earl. We tossed and turned, every now and then breaking into some exclamation about what had happened. At about four in the morning we both dozed off, exhausted, and neither of us heard the alarm go off at six. It was Polly coming in with coffee at seven that roused us.

"Didn't think you two had plans to sleep all day," she said, "seeing it's Saturday. Guess what?"

"At seven in the morning who needs riddles," Earl growled.

"Nora Fitzmaurice has confessed to shooting Bagley. Last night she went to the station and gave herself up. Ron, he's downstairs getting ready to open up. He rode to work with that young constable. The news reporter told him the same thing."

"Bloody hell!" Earl's cup banged into the saucer. "Those two! Now both of 'em's up to the neck, for a stinker like Bagley. Polly, you sure know how to start a day."

"She's out on bail," Polly went on, crashing up the window blinds. "There's a police matron staying with her on the farm. Mattie Crossland, she's gone out with Reggie to his place." Polly stood holding the door in her hand. "You ready for something else?"

"Why not, we're case hardened by now." Earl's coffee cup rattled as he set it on the bedside table. "Young Ron, don't tell me he's been up to something?"

"Not Ron, no. Remember Rachel's boy, Alvin, that girl Elsie he got into trouble, and Rachel took her in? Well, she's back with the child, a teenager he is now. They're staying with Rachel. Seems Elsie's divorced. And the boy, I'm told, is the living image of Alvin."

Polly's hesitant manner as she stood holding the door indicated that she wasn't finished. Nervously, Earl and I waited. Still Polly stood, staring

over our heads out the windows.

"Something else you've got on your mind?" Earl ventured.

"Elsie, she'd be a good one for you to have in the market," Polly said slowly.

Earl and I looked at each other in surprise. "But, Polly," Earl said, "we've hardly—there's four of us already."

"Three, Earl. I'm getting married. The chief and me. He's been promoted. We'll be leaving Longvalley."

I've never known Polly to close a door so quietly. We hardly knew she'd gone.

That's the kind of day that Saturday was from the start.

"Two can't be charged with the same one murder, can they, Earl?" I asked. We'd gobbled breakfast and had joined Polly and Ron downstairs. What a good lad Ron is for us. I felt truly grateful for him. To be losing Polly, well, if you can imagine feeling glad and sad all at one time, and add to that my remembering how devout my prayer for Polly had been, you'll understand the turmoil I was in.

"Sure they can, if both have had a hand in it. But you know right well that Nora's saying she did it just to get Reggie off the hook. Don't forget that Reggie had the gun. Don't forget that Rory saw the gun early that Friday. Comes Reggie to the farm for gas and sees the state that Nora's in. Who's to say that Reggie didn't grab the gun and go looking for Harry? Reggie's in big trouble as I see it."

But the story that Nora now told had sinister impact, for, little as most of us wanted to believe Beamer Ross's tale, Nora's latest version coincided with that.

"Harry and I had had a terrible row," Nora said. "I'd forbidden him to take my horse. He'd been ruining her. I knew when that thunder and lightning got started that the horse would be panicked, tied up to a tree in the hotel parking lot. I went to get my horse back, and I took the gun because I meant to kill Harry. From where I was at the back of the parking lot I saw him come out of the bar. When he started tormenting the horse I fired, but missed. I ran up Meadow Lane as Harry and the horse went up Main Street. I was waiting for him by the lilac bushes as he crossed the vacant lot. That's when I killed him. I took the horse and went home."

"How did Reggie Crossland get your gun?" the inspector had asked.

"I'd just got home when Reggie came into the yard. He'd run out of gas. He came into the kitchen. We talked for a while. The gun was on the kitchen table. Reggie said he had need of just such a gun. I sold it to him along with a box of cartridges and the gas for his truck." That was Nora's story, and she was sticking to it.

Needless to say that Beamer Ross went about telling everybody, "I told you so. Seen her shoot him I did with my own eyes."

"You seen nothing of the sort, Beamer," one of Beamer's drinking pals told him. "We all went out, remember. And Harry wasn't there, neither was he dead, for others saw him going up Main Street. Gun flashes you say you saw. Malarky! Lightning was what you saw."

And Reggie swore he had proof that Nora did not kill Harry. Her fingerprints on the gun? Why not? It had been her gun, she had handled it many times. He had not cleaned it in any way, had just set it down out of the way in his kitchen broom closet.

"Something's wrong with all of it," Earl said. "Nora and Reggie, those two are trying to protect each other. Each thinks the other did it. Now, to me that means that neither of 'em did it. If neither of them killed Harry, who did?"

And then all charges against Nora were dropped. And that was a shock, too, for it meant that now Reggie was surely suspect. He'd left Nora at the farm, taking the gun and cartridges. He was in a rage against Harry, seeing the condition that Nora was in, and upset by what she'd told him. Had the horse arrived back while he was there, or even before, Reggie could have deduced that Harry was not too far away, making his way home on foot. And on the vacant lot Reggie, carrying the loaded gun, had found him. Speculation had Reggie guilty of the crime. Moreover, Inspector Hardman's findings appeared to bolster that.

What Inspector Hardman had found was that Nora had indeed been on the hotel parking lot, but without the gun, and that she had not gone home by way of Meadow Lane that runs parallel to Main Street. Her first story had been that she had gone to the parking lot by the river path, returning the same way. It was on that path that the inspector found Nora's footprints in damp soil where, beneath thickly leafed trees, they had not been washed away by the rain; impressions showing clearly Nora's shoeprints going both ways. Further, there were handprints where she had fallen.

Had Nora been carrying a gun, those handprints, so the detective

thought, would not have been so clearly defined, fingers outstretched. Moreover, the gun had not been cleaned by Reggie or anyone and, although showing evidence of having been recently fired, it carried no trace whatsoever of the mud or soil where Nora had stumbled. Then, too, the spot where she had tripped gave proof that the fall had been on her return, the handprints pointing plainly the direction she'd been going. Nora, the inspector said, had not gone up Meadow Lane to meet and kill Harry as he entered the vacant lot from Main Street. She had returned home by the river path as she had said in her first story.

Then, overnight, came further incriminating evidence against Reggie. The two spent cartridges from Nora's shotgun were found in his rain slicker pocket. "Hidden away in a mountain shack," the newspaper had it; a cabin that Reggie had built on the mountain for his needs when tending sheep in that area. Simultaneously, in his farmhouse, the detectives discovered a bloodstained jacket. Things could not have looked blacker for Reggie.

All of this was followed by yet another confusing aspect. Through Doc Entwistle, who had had to report it, Inspector Hardman discovered that Reggie had been shot in the right arm. Shotgun pellets embedded there had caused an infection. So, who had shot Reggie? "I suppose I was careless with the gun," he said. On the same day that the sergeant found the spent cartridges in Reggie's pocket, Inspector Hardman found two further spent cartridges in Meadow Lane, these latter being totally unexplainable, for they did not fit Nora's gun. A close check proved that Harry's face had been full of Number 6 shot from the latter two cartridges found in Meadow Lane, not the Number 5 shot in the ones fitting Nora's gun. The shot in Reggie's right arm was definitely from Nora's gun.

Inspector Hardman, sitting across from Reggie and Nora in the Fitzmaurice farm kitchen, looked grim. "I want the truth and I want it now," he said. "If neither of you killed Bagley, are you protecting someone? I shall get the truth, of course, and if either of you is withholding evidence it could go hard for you."

Reggie, right arm in a sling, told the story for both himself and Nora. "I got into the Fitzmaurice farmyard that stormy Friday night with my gallon can for gas," Reggie began. "There was a yard light on, but no lights were on in the house. I was afraid I'd have to rouse someone out of bed, and then I saw that the kitchen door was partly open. I pushed on the door and had stepped forward to enter, was about to shout, when

a blast of shot hit me, getting the doorjamb mostly. I yelled, 'What the hell's going on!'

"And then there was Nora, flinging the gun down and screaming. But she could only weep and hold onto me. When I switched on the kitchen light I saw the state the room was in: things overthrown, dishes smashed. And Nora's little white dog lay dead on the floor. Nora was sopping wet and mudstained.

"After a while, although Nora was still hysterical, she was telling me: 'I thought you were Harry. I was waiting for him. I was going to kill him for what he did tonight to little Persha, and to my horse that Charlie gave me.' That's what she was crying. And had it been Harry she wouldn't have killed him. She'd have missed him just as she missed me. I know she didn't kill Harry because there she was at home waiting for him. And when I left I took the gun with me. I said I wanted to buy the gun. Right enough I needed one for the rabbits, like I said.

"When Nora told me what Harry had done, and I saw that little dog and the way that kitchen looked, and the way Nora was, I said, 'I'll go and get that bastard. I'll give him the thrashing of his life.' I saw what he'd reduced Nora to. I wanted to get my hands on him. But Nora screamed at me: 'No, Reggie, no. Don't go near him. Tonight he's worse than he's ever been. The drink has finally driven him mad. He's completely out of control.'

"I ejected the two cartridges she'd fired and dropped them into my slicker pocket. Then together we buried that little dog. I went to the orchard and dug a hole where Nora said while she wrapped it in a bath towel. She sort of collapsed, weeping, on its grave. She was in a shocking state, wet and muddy, and cold. I do believe if I could have got my hands on Bagley right then there wouldn't have been much left of him. I picked Nora up and carried her into the house. After she calmed down we both noticed that my arm was bleeding. I'd taken off the slicker, even then not realizing I'd been hit. I had felt a bit of a sting. Nora got out some of the shot and put iodine on the arm and bandaged it. I said I'd get it looked after. I tried doctoring it myself later when it began to fester.

"When I thought that Nora was all right I left, taking the gun with me. She was overwrought, and Harry, no telling what mood he'd be in, she might have another go at him. I didn't see Harry that night. I'd promised I'd not go back looking for him. I didn't know that Harry was dead until I came into town the following Monday. I'd a deal going through at the

bank for the purchase of some farm machinery. Seems when Harry had been found shot Nora thought that I had gone back to find him. Up the mountain as I was most of that week, building my cabin, I heard no news at all. Evenings, I got the chores done and slept mostly."

Two mysterious cartridges. Someone had waited for Harry, or had met him crossing the lot, and had killed him, then had gone down Meadow Lane ejecting the spent cartridges. Someone other than Nora or Reggie had wanted Harry dead. But who? Well, that could be all the rest of us.

"The hand of God is in it. Charlie Fitzmaurice came back from the grave!" What had been whispers began to be boldly outspoken. Wishful thinking, I say, a way out when nothing logical works; something to mitigate the unbearable frustration. I couldn't shake the feeling that, collectively, we'd all had a hand in it.

Being released didn't free Reggie or Nora from suspicion. The grim shadow of doubt hung heavy, a black cloud. Two fine people whom we had watched grow from childhood, whom we all loved, should they come together at last were never to escape the burden of suspicion. Knowing their own innocence could provide no real peace as long as accusing eyes were turned on them. That's how Longvallians are, we have to have it in black and white. I couldn't get my heart up out of my boots. The detectives did not leave Longvalley. They had arrived back at the point of beginning all over again, with a trail gone cold. And that, we all sensed, should make them dig deeper, failure being unacceptable to them.

And then George Banner died. With his death the devastating truth was revealed. In wonderment we heard how it had happened. That fateful Friday night, following his nightly routine, George had gone for a leisurely horseback ride. At Rachel's suggestion he'd taken his gun, hoping to get a rabbit or two. Rachel did make the best rabbit pie, George's favorite. Returning home as the storm rumbled overhead, George, unobserved among the trees on his own side of the river, saw Nora run towards the hotel parking lot, and also Bagley in the distance, in some sort of trouble with the horse, going off into Main Street. Nora, deeply disturbed, weeping and stumbling, had turned back through the trees and along the river path towards her home. "My poor Brownie. My little Persha, dead, murdered; murdered! Charlie! Charlie! Oh, God! let me die tonight!"

On his horse George sat, his blood running cold at Nora's desperate sobbing. Still loving Nora and feeling in his very soul a duty to his lifelong friend Charlie, George put his horse to fording the river, heading into

Meadow Lane. Totally without plan or purpose, merely seeking movement to work off the anger pounding in his head, hearing only Nora's voice, seeing only Nora's face and Charlie's.

At the top of the lane he drew rein, not quite knowing why he'd come there. No one was in sight. Lightheadedness seemed to lift him; he no longer felt earthbound. Outside of himself he floated skyward. Vaguely George realized that some untoward thing was reaching a climax inside him, knew that a final destiny was unfolding over which he had no control. Thunder crashed, lightning split the clouds and found its way into his head. It didn't matter; the pain he'd lived with was gone, numbness was developing. In his ears an ocean roared and pounded.

And in the shadowy distance there was Bagley, and the mare, entering the rubble-strewn lot from the Main Street side. Among the scattered masonry Harry stumbled and fell, losing his hold on the mare's bridle. A crack of thunder and the mare plunged, rearing, whinnying in terror, then, finding herself free, galloped off.

Without haste, as though other forces than his own had the ordering, George raised the gun and, as a sheet of lightning illumined the area, he fired. There was stillness and darkness, and then the gentler sounds of rain. George's horse, sensing no restraint nor guidance on the bit, turned homeward. George, following the habit of years, with fingers that fumbled now, ejected the shells into the lane.

At the river's edge where the footbridge spanned the narrower, deeper water, George let the gun go. It fell into the water with a barely audible splash and sank at once, soft black mud sucking it down, a quiet gurgle. The water's surface, briefly rippled and mud-dyed, had settled by the time George had crossed. He shuddered and slumped forward. Once home he had had to be carried into the house. He could neither walk nor talk.

"A stroke," Doc Entwistle said. "But vital signs are good. He'll come out of this."

Rachel was horrified. "He'd been feeling so good lately. I shouldn't have let him—he never should have gone riding."

"Why the hell not?" Doc said. "I told him to do whatever he felt like doing."

Only with difficulty had George finally been able to tell Doc what had happened, not being quite sure that it had. Perhaps his realization of what had really happened came only then, for George suffered a second

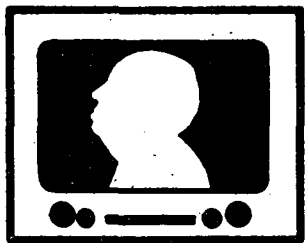
stroke, his overstrained heart giving way. His end had been peaceable. Rachel, who had suffered along with George's days of pain, felt calm, her own burden lifted. Of course, Entwistle had had to tell Hardman. But they never did find the gun.

The shockwave through Longvalley, though profound, was only briefly devastating. In awed tones Longvallians whispered: "We said all along that the hand of God was in it that night. Since the beginning of time hasn't He wrought his ordering through special people?" They thought that Charlie, through George, had been the instrument.

As for me, it made me shiver. Never before had I recognized the burden that the ancient ones had carried, the staggering responsibility of asking and of having been listened to.

Tonight, the first in a long time, my poor exhausted Earl is sleeping like a babe. From the window I can see over the moonlit valley. Beneath the lovely trees the river flows, silvered with starlight. So quiet the street outside. The storm, at last, is really over.

The July issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale May 27.



CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

The witty and acerbic Blake Edwards seems for the moment to be riding the crest of a comedy wave. His *10*, which first exposed the charms of Bo Derek to international audiences, was the comedy highlight of recent years. He followed that with *S.O.B.*, where he was allowed, humorously to a bizarre degree, to be critical of the Hollywood system that had failed to appreciate some of his previous films. His *Pink Panther* series has been a blockbuster triumph. But as Peter Lehman and William Luhr point out in their scholarly study *Blake Edwards*, published recently by Ohio University Press, the director is often dark and somber.

Edwards has made significant contributions throughout his career to the mystery film. In the early fifties he began by writing and directing radio scripts for *Richard Diamond*, *Private Detective*, wherein hero Dick Powell added an easy-going style to tough and violent crime dramas. (He even sang a song to his wealthy sweetheart at the end of each show.) Powell helped Edwards make the transition to television where, in 1958, the writer-director created one of its most memorable mystery shows, *Peter Gunn*. From the pulsing, staccato opening (with music by Henry Mancini) to the studio-shot, elaborate, film *noir* direction, all slick angles and stylish shadows, the show was both witty and hardboiled—indeed, at times the mix was unsettling. Gunn (Craig Stevens) was no rumpled outsider from the pages of *Black Mask*; he was dashing, debonair, and well-dressed, and he spent most of his free time at a waterfront jazz spot called Mother's, listening to the club's singer, his girl Edie. There he could be found by Lieutenant Jacoby of the L.A.P.D. and contacted by a rich variety of underworld clients and friends. In addition, Edwards

created the *Mr. Lucky* series, about a professional gambler with a floating casino who has plenty of conflict with crime figures while trying to keep his operation straight.

During the fifties, Edwards also directed some theatrical features with modest budgets, some (like *He Laughed Last* and *Mister Corey*) involving gambling and crime. Then, in 1961, he brought Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to the screen, giving the story of Holly Golightly and her quaint friends his sophisticated gloss. He followed it with a film far different: *Experiment in Terror*, the first movie he produced as well as directed and his first film in black and white, a serious crime story that quite lives up to its title. A maniacal stranger (Ross Martin) approaches bank teller Lee Remick out of the darkness and whispers, "I know a good deal about you, almost everything there is to know." His plan is to terrorize the girl into committing a major bank robbery for him, and he kills several people to make his point. Soon, however, an FBI agent (Glenn Ford) gets involved in the case, and the hunt is on for an unknown murderer. It is a stark film full of dramatic images—as when death occurs in a mannequin factory.

In 1964 Edwards directed and co-wrote the first film in the *Pink Panther* series. The "panther" itself is the shape of a flaw in an otherwise perfect diamond sought by the world's most skillful thieves and confidence men and protected by the valiant Inspector Jacques Clouseau (Peter Sellers). Clouseau is as far removed from the FBI's Glenn Ford as it is possible for a police officer to be. He can stand outside a bank arguing law with a beggar while inside a robbery progresses. He can escape professional assassins unscathed while innocent bystanders drop around him. He can bungle the simplest investigation. He can be unaware of the murderous hatred of his superior, Chief Inspector Dreyfus (Herbert Lom), whom he drives insane over the course of several films and who, at the end of one film, is found in an asylum, totally mad, scrawling "Kill Clouseau" on the walls (the image is taken from Fritz Lang's German Dr. Mabuse melodramas). Stumbling, bumbling, a beatific innocent, Clouseau, counterpointed in all his movie openings by an animated Pink Panther sometimes trenchcoated, sometimes bomb-throwing, has become an enduring detective figure, a comical investigator who manages nonetheless to solve all his cases at the finale.

Edwards brought his *Peter Gunn* to the theater screen in 1967. *Gunn* saw the destruction (by explosion) of *Mother's*, a good deal of violence,

and a brutal, surprising whodunit finish. Three years later he starred his wife, Julie Andrews, in *Darling Lili*, a romantic comedy about World War I espionage. Lili is a performer entertaining wounded Allied soldiers on European hospital grounds. When an enemy zeppelin appears overhead, she calms her audience with patriotic songs—but in actuality she is a German spy, there to extract secrets from the Allied Command. Happily, by the finish American officer Rock Hudson has converted her to the winning side.

Edwards followed the lighthearted *Lili* with a grim Western, *Wild Rovers*, and then *The Carey Treatment* (1972), a hospital drama based on the novel *A Case of Need* by Michael Crichton writing as Jeffrey Hudson. In it, a successful pathologist (James Coburn) arrives at a Boston hospital to defend his friend, an Oriental doctor. The latter has been arrested for performing an illegal operation that resulted in the death of the hospital director's daughter. It is a genuine mystery, and Coburn uses both medical and investigative detection to ferret out the real killer, perhaps among the institution's staff. But the overriding atmosphere of operating rooms and mortuaries make this a bleak, doom-laden film. MGM made some alterations in the finished product before its release, and Edwards has virtually disowned the result, one of the reasons for his current stand against the Hollywood establishment.

But his next film, *The Tamarind Seed* (1974), a tense, romantic drama of international intrigue set in such diverse locales as Barbados, London, and Moscow (the film is based on a novel by Evelyn Anthony), is his most controlled melodrama, neither dark nor camp. Julie Andrews, playing a secretary to an important British trade official, meets a dynamic Russian embassy executive (Omar Sharif) while both are vacationing in the Caribbean. For a variety of reasons, the Russian is ready to begin a relationship with her and to defect to the West, bringing with him the identity of "Blue," a Russian mole in the British Secret Service. We know who Blue actually is, and we watch in terror as he is placed in charge of orchestrating Sharif's defection, knowing that the Russian may well die instead. As Anthony Quayle, Blue's unwitting boss, wearily and all too truthfully comments about his embassy staff: "No one is to be trusted, nothing is to be believed, and anyone is capable of doing anything." The film has a bittersweet, surprise ending—after a shoot-out that resembles James Bond. *The Tamarind Seed* is Blake Edwards' first attempt at a Hitchcock-style spy thriller, and is one of his very best creative efforts.

Every one of Blake Edwards' films since *Tamarind* has been a box office hit. Currently, his *Victor/Victoria* is being finished, in which Julie Andrews pretends to be a man who is a female impersonator, a double-switch, nothing-is-to-be-believed, bizarre situation apparently ready-made for the Edwards touch. The man who stole the Pink Panther is about to strike again.

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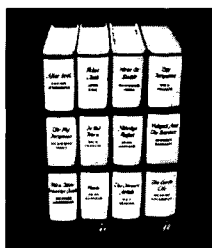
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